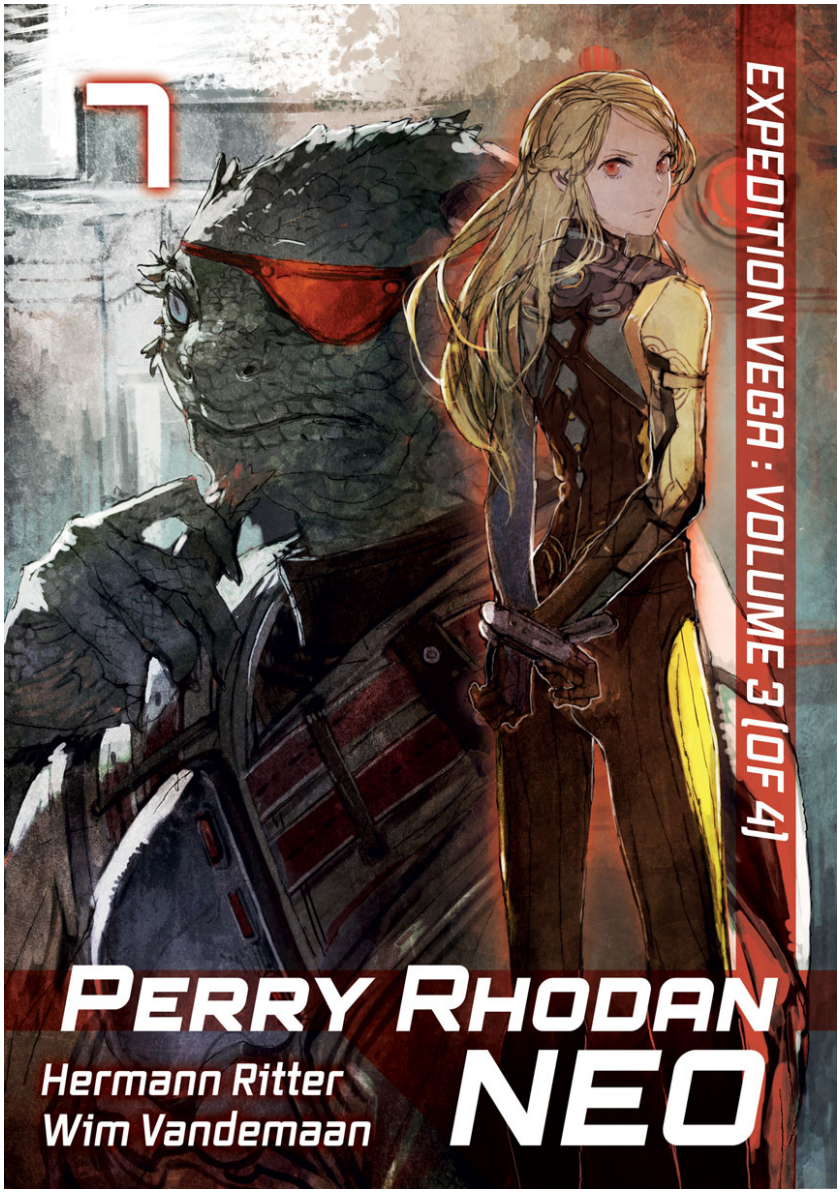
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PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Hermann Ritter
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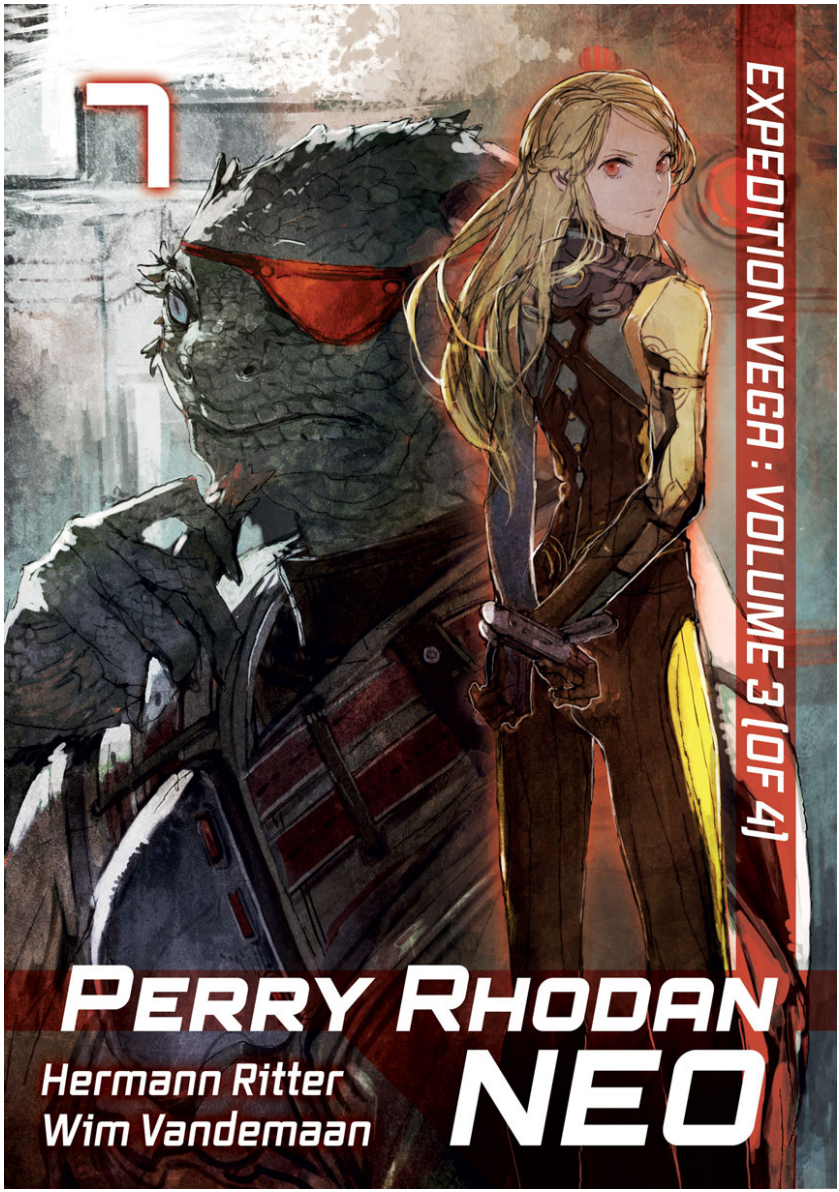
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Episode 13: Shadows over Ferrol

By Hermann Ritter

In the late summer of 2036, Perry Rhodan and his companions embark on the first interstellar flight ever to be undertaken by humanity —only to get caught up in the chaos of war. The humans arrive in the solar system of the blue sun Vega, where the lizard-like Topsidans are attacking the worlds of the Ferron.

Rhodan's spaceship gets shot down, and his group is separated. Half must fight for survival on the planet Ferrol while the others are taken prisoner. During the second group's escape, which takes them across many worlds, they get to know the system of the Transmitters. These are mysterious devices that can be used to cover huge distances, practically without losing any time at all.

Meanwhile, on Earth, the situation is becoming more critical. The strange Fantan are stealing everything they are interested in without consideration for anyone or anything. Resistance to their technology seems pointless. But three young Terrans dare the impossible...and risk everything in doing so...

1.

Thorta burning

Ferrol, Thorta

The four men climbed over the last hill. For the first time, they had a clear view of the land spreading out before them. However, what they saw in the light of the morning sun was sobering.

Three of them had flown light years and many kilometers to get there. All three had survived the cold vacuum of space as well as

the increased gravity and often oppressive humidity of the alien world. Each of them had dreamed different dreams of what other worlds might be like before.

The dreams of the first were very much like the images typical of early science-fiction TV shows from the 1960s. In them, men in different-colored outfits visited planet after planet, where humanlike extraterrestrials lived. They were always surrounded by beautiful women, and their boots never got dirty.

The second person's dreams involved monsters, who emerged from volcanoes following the nuclear bomb attacks on Japan in the 1940s with only one goal—to raze Japan, and Tokyo in particular, to the ground. If the Japanese film directors had realized that, 60 years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, their homeland would be the victim of self-inflicted negligence, they would never have dared to play around with ideas of atomic energy and its consequences in their films.

The third person dreamed about flying saucers that were far superior to Earthly technology, out of which beautiful beings emerged from a much more developed culture, their aim to show humanity the way to the cosmos, dominated by a spirit of brotherliness, love, and the generation of pure energy.

Over the past few days, each of them had learned a great deal about this alien world. They had walked on another planet under an alien sun. They had met beings whose appearances were only slightly different to that of humans, and whose dreams and aspirations seemed to be very similar to those of human beings.

All three natives of Earth had the same images in their heads when they looked down at the plain. Like in one of those computer games where you had to create a civilization or fly to the stars, the history that had led to what they saw—as they imagined it—unfolded within their minds.

Ferron hunting groups became tribes looking for building spots for their settlements. The first settlers must have been very careful about the first spot they'd chosen. Two streams came together to form a larger river that disappeared over the horizon into the

morning mist. The first settlers had no doubt followed the river inland to find a place for their first settlement.

The range of hills in the north and the east shielded the lowlands, protecting the plain from the weather conditions to a certain extent. The settlers had probably chosen the area between the two rivers, as it was fertile and easy to defend.

The hills also made sure that sentinels stationed on the hilltops had an extensive view of the land and could identify any dangers before they came close to the city.

In time, the settlement had continued to grow. Later, a small town developed, then city walls, fortifications, and a seat of government. Eventually, the city's influence had grown further. Perhaps it had first ruled a small tribal area, then a larger kingdom, then ultimately the entire continent.

However, Ferrol had developed farther than Earth. The city's domain had expanded to other planets and then to the solar system itself. And now, the entire system was ruled from here. In the days when peace reigned, their spaceships also traveled to other worlds.

A long way, Rhodan thought to himself. *A very long way.*

"What next?" Ras Tschubai asked Chaktor, their Ferron companion who had remained with them. *What a stroke of luck that we at least have the translator devices; otherwise, we'd be completely on our own,* Rhodan thought.

Until a few minutes ago, there had been five of them. The Ferron resistance had escorted them this far—and *not one step farther*, as one of them had said adamantly. The local was becoming increasingly worried about his family, about his tribe.

The humans could understand that well. The Topsidan attacks were becoming heavier by the hour. The closer the small group got to the capital city, the more often they had to leave the road, as their path was blocked by heaps of rubble or gaping holes in the road surface. Several times, they had to seek refuge in entryways or

below bridges to avoid Topsidan patrols, which flew low down over the roads in search of pockets of Ferron resistance.

The number of deserted houses lining the road increased. Open windows showed that the inhabitants had fled with great haste, and open doors flapping in the wind were more evidnce of the same. *Images we know all too well from Earth,* Rhodan thought.

It had proven impossible to get hold of a vehicle for the journey to Thorta. All of the vehicles they encountered were coming from the city, but there was not a single one heading in the other direction.

“We have to get to the Red Palace, to Thorta.” Chaktor had taken the time to answer Tschubai’s question.

“And how do you see us managing that?” Rhodan asked.

The Ferron looked at him, surprised. “You will know when the time has come.”

Once again, Rhodan was overcome by the almost religious way the Ferrons treated the humans. He looked at each of the faces of his companions. Chaktor, the Ferron, was invaluable as a native guide, but he seemed to expect the humans to be the ones to take the initiative despite this being his home planet.

It was still surprising to Rhodan how quickly he had grown accustomed to the outward appearance of extraterrestrials. Chaktor’s blue skin, his deep-set eyes, his stocky physique, his humanoid facial features, and the often different expressions and gestures were all superficial. Beneath the surface, Rhodan soon found so many *common* features they shared, which was far more important than what made them different.

Ras Tschubai was a teleporter, but his powers were not nearly strong enough to transport them blind into the heart of a city several kilometers away. Wuriu Sengu, the stocky Japanese man, was a scout who could see through solid material. His powers were not of much use at the moment, but at least they both had abilities that went far beyond what a normal human could manage. A

question ran through Rhodan's mind again and again. What could he contribute to this mission? He, Rhodan the pilot?

He could hear a sound coming closer and looked up. Another vehicle passed them. From a distance, it looked like a bus from Earth, filled to the very last seat with parents and small children as well as household items that had obviously been hastily packed.

"Four adults, Red Palace, single direct," Tschubai said dryly.

Rhodan looked again at the vehicle. It was smaller and bulkier than similar vehicles on Earth. That had to do with the physical build of the Ferrons, who often only reached the shoulders of the average human. In addition, the Ferrons obviously demanded less personal space for themselves. In his homeland, America, it would have been unthinkable to see so many people traveling on public transport packed together like that.

Wuriu added something to Tschubai's comment. "Would all of us fit into that sardine tin? In my home country, we are used to being squeezed in tight, but not *that* tight!"

"I would be happy to be squeezed in tightly and on wheels rather than have lots of space and go on foot." Tschubai gave a dramatic sigh. "And add to that the constant feeling that you're carrying a backpack full of stones!" He stretched as if to demonstrate how the heavy gravity was weighing him down.

Rhodan was glad that his companions were letting off a bit of steam. The banter between Tschubai and Wuriu distracted them from the problem: they didn't know how they were going to get into the heart of the Ferron Empire.

Rhodan shielded his eyes with his hand and let his gaze roam across the city before him. *Terrania could also become this big*, he thought. *At some point...if the Earth is given enough time to develop to such an extent. But how old is Thorta? Older than Athens? Older than the Pyramids?*

He heard the sound of someone clearing their throat behind him and turned around. It was Chaktor. The noise had sounded very

human to Rhodan.

Chaktor was staring towards Thorta, and Rhodan could see from his expression that it wasn't just any old city to him. It was *the* city of all cities. Thorta, center of the Ferron Empire. No doubt once a proud city, beautiful and ancient. But now...

"I never thought I would experience something like this." Chaktor hesitated. With a nervous gesture, he pointed towards the city stretched out before them. "See for yourselves! Smoke billowing into the sky over Thorta. The modern city, home to millions, is burning—and yet, as tragic as that is, it means we will be able to reach the Red Palace. Inside the city of millions, the old historical city lives on. And this old city, with its crooked alleyways, its filigree facades, its many guest houses and restaurants, is irreplaceable. And it is burning too!" He paused for a second. None of the humans said a word. "For almost 7,000 years, while there may have been disputes in Thorta, there has been no fighting. There have been many factions over time who tried to take control of the city using swords or pistols, their aim to ultimately take over the entire solar system. But Ferrons have never sunk so low as to set fire to old buildings." He turned towards the three humans. "Strangers started it. And it will be strangers who end it."

With a typically human gesture, Chaktor crossed his arms across his chest.

He looks a little like a carving of a native American that you can buy in souvenir shops in the American Midwest, Rhodan thought. *How different and how similar they are to us.*

"We will find a solution!" he promised Chaktor.

Rhodan, Tschubai and Wuriu bent over the sketch of Thorta that Chaktor had made for them on a large sheet of something similar to paper. Rhodan was surprised by how easily he accepted such things these days. If someone had said to him a few months ago that he would be working with humanoid extraterrestrials outside of his own solar system, he would have laughed out loud. Now he was having to learn new things every single day, and every day he had

to rethink and question the experience and knowledge he had gained on his home planet over the years.

But isn't that exactly what I wanted?

The others looked at him, expecting him to take the initiative.

"Where exactly do we have to go?" he asked Chaktor.

The Ferron pointed at the center of the city. "Thorta's heart beats at the point where the five big access roads meet." He drew a circle in the middle of the map. "The center of Thorta is actually a city within a city. The Red City is the center of Ferron power."

"All that is the Red Palace?" Tschubai was surprised by the size of the government district.

Rhodan alone had a sense of how different Ferron history was from that of humans. "I was wondering why Chaktor said it wasn't far to the Red Palace. We underestimated what a gigantic structure it is. Don't forget the Ferrons had thousands of years to build this city! We have to forget our human ideas about dimensions if we want to understand other people."

"A Vegan Vatican..." Tschubai said thoughtfully.

"A Vatican filled with blue-skinned people that is under attack from lizards from another solar system," Wuriu added.

"A group of people from Earth want to intrude on a kind of Vatican established by blue-skinned people baneath the light of Vega that is under attack from lizards from another solar system." Tschubai obviously liked this game.

"That's enough!" As funny as he sometimes found this interaction between the two men, this was the wrong time for it. "We have a job to do. The Topsidans are still attacking the city. The Ferron resistance has practically collapsed here, and only the Red Palace seems to be offering any kind of organized defense. Until we have established contact with the defenders, we can't know whether the Ferrons can help us."

Rhodan looked at Chaktor with a questioning expression.

"Correct," their Ferron companion answered. "My people are in a purely defensive position, trying to save what they can. There can be no talk of a real and active resistance…especially as the Topsidian weapons are far superior to ours."

"The airspace is in the hands of the Topsidans, the roads are unsafe, Ras can't bring all of us into the city center…" Rhodan thought things over for a minute before turning to Chaktor. "I don't know to what extent the technical development on Ferrol has parallels to Earth. But when I think back to Wuriu's comment a few minutes ago about the vehicles… What is the mass transport situation like in the capital?"

"There is an expansive network of underground railway lines, but—"

"Do you mean the underground lines have survived the air attacks?"

"Most of them were installed at depths of more than fifty meters so that the buildings in the capital wouldn't be damaged."

"So the connections should be functional?"

Chaktor thought about it for a moment. "I can't say anything about the area surrounding the Red Palace." He pointed to several dots on his sketch. "There are exits close to the government palace here and here. I assume the air attacks have been more heavy-handed there, which means worse damage is likely. It could be that we arrive and then can't leave the station."

"And how do we know," Tschubai interrupted, "that all underground trains haven't already left the city, transporting refugees?"

Rhodan had thought about that, and he had an answer. "If the underground lines can still be used, there will certainly be transports going back and forth, leaving Thorta with one load and returning to bring more people out of the city."

“Ah.” Tschubai looked thoughtfully at the sketch. “And if the underground station we want to get to has caved in or is very difficult to access...”

“...then we’ll turn to Wuriu and, if necessary, to you as well!” Rhodan said, finishing off Tschubai’s thought. “Chaktor, how far is it from here to the next underground entrance?”

“On foot? Twenty minutes. Or half an hour, the way you calculate time.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Four adults, Red Palace, single direct, thank you!” Wuriu said.

Tschubai gave him a dirty look.

“Can’t a person be Japanese and still have a sense of humor?” Wuriu asked.

The Sudanese man said nothing, picked up his backpack, and marched off.

Rhodan looked at his watch again. In his time estimate, Chaktor had not considered the fact that the humans were slower in the heavier gravity than the Ferrons were. On top of that, they had to take cover twice when Topsidian gliders passed overhead, flying at low altitude. They saw Topsidian spacehips above them again and again, providing gliders with fire cover or helpimg the searches by using their rangefinders.

“They’re looking for pockets of resistance to bomb them from the air,” Chaktor said.

Also something I’m familiar with from our own history. Will we humans break through that pattern, which seems to be common to both Ferrons and humans?

Rhodan was resolute. “Chaktor, we will do everything in our power to help your people!” He didn’t actually know how they would achieve that. But then, only a short time before, he hadn’t expected to venture farther than the Moon’s orbit.

One step at a time...

"Over there!" Chaktor pointed towards a stairway surrounded by a low concrete wall, descending into the underground.

"On Earth there would be a kiosk on the left and a group of singing buddhists on the right."

"This isn't Earth, Ras."

Strange. Was it the adrenaline? A combination of physical activity being more strenuous because of the heavy gravity and fear of the Topsidans? Rhodan had read that mountain climbers or Arctic explorers reacted to the most extreme stress situations with humor.

"Understood, Perry. I'll get rid of the buddhists..."

A smile crossed Rhodan's lips. "I only hope the Ferrons don't want to see our tickets."

Chaktor didn't seem to understand why that was funny. "Our public transport has been free of charge for centuries. After we solved the energy problems, our forefathers saw no need to make mass transport artificially expensive."

The humans said nothing, embarrassed.

Without a word, Chaktor led them into Thorta's underground. They had to climb down the stairs, as the escalators were not running. A result of the Topsidan attacks? Rhodan looked around. Something was bothering him. It wasn't the building style, as its basic structure followed the same logical rules as architecture on Earth. Then he realized the lighting was different than stations on Earth.

The different sunlight... We humans try to reproduce the light of our sun during the daytime, and the Ferrons do the same on their planet with their own sunlight.

The stairway went down into the depths. Fifty steps. One hundred steps.

What is it that makes us different? What do we have in common? Rhodan again realized that he felt connected to these strangers. What had he expected? Ancient statues of idols or figures of the mortal sins looking down on them from the walls of the underground shaft? Or a technology that took you to your destination in seconds at the press of a button? Market stalls full of onions and potatoes, where old Ferron women sold vegetables in colorful pinafores before traveling back to their home villages far away from the capital?

Not too long ago he had been a staunch American. It was on the Moon when he became a human being. And what was he now, a citizen of the cosmos?

One hundred and fifty steps. Two hundred steps. They reached a hall. Illuminated Ferron writing was hanging in the air like a hologram. Part of it was made up of short words, apparently the names of the stations in each direction. Larger surfaces were filled with colored lines, circles, and floating writing. It was obviously a map of Thorta's underground railway network.

Rhodan looked at it until he understood the system. Some colored lights started moving, and he heaved a sigh of relief. That meant trains were still operating.

"Where to now?" he asked.

Without a word, Chaktor moved towards one of the holograms to take a closer look. "Trains really are still running..." he murmured, giving Rhodan an approving smile. "If we're lucky, one will be arriving two levels below us in a few minutes, and it will take us to the area where the Red Palace is." He turned to Rhodan, who was looking around. "What are you searching for?"

"If the trains are transporting refugees out of the city, they won't stop at every station on the way back. I'm looking for some kind of emergency signal, a warning lamp, a sign that the train should stop here."

"You're right." Chaktor started looking around as well. Then he walked over to the hologram, which was projected onto the front

end of the space. He touched two blue points at the same time with the spread-out fingers of his right hand and the display changed immediately.

An impressive technology, and apparently everyone knows how to use it.

Rhodan watched every move Chaktor made. The Ferron touched three or four points of the screen quickly, one after the other, then one of the moving points began to flash. Chaktor turned back to the humans.

“I told the underground control center we had a medical emergency. The next train will come straight here without stopping on the way. We’ll have time for explanations later.”

“We can say we lost our blue skin color on the way here...which is why we have to get to the Red Palace as fast as possible,” Tschubai offered.

“Ras!” But Rhodan couldn’t help but laugh.

2.

Before the Red Palace

Ferrol, Thorta

They sat in the simple carriage of the train, the only passengers on board. It was taking them towards the center of Thorta.

“How long does the trip take?” Rhodan asked.

“Ten minutes, perhaps twelve,” Chaktor answered. “As we aren’t stopping at any stations along the way, we should arrive much sooner than the timetable says.”

Underground, they sensed nothing of the fighting going on in Thorta. The fifty meters of soil prevented any noise or tremors from getting through.

“Why are the Topsidans still attacking?” Tschubai asked.

The Ferron was quick to answer. “If they do not conquer Thorta and the Red Palace, they cannot conquer the Ferron Empire. It doesn’t matter if they occupy our planet, prevent us from space travel, and beat our troops at every opportunity. Only those who control the Red Palace control the entire system. Because the Thort resides in the Red Palace.”

“The Thort...”

“Our undisputed ruler,” Chaktor explained. “Peace came many thousands of years ago when the Thort took command. As long as the Thort is free, the light shines...even more so now that you are with us!” Chaktor sighed. “I wish I could have brought you to Thorta under better circumstances. How I would have loved to welcome strangers from the stars and show them the landmarks and wonders of our capital city. We could have visited restaurants, museums, the color theater, or the zoo. We could have listened to the discussions in the universities or enjoyed the city’s nightlife. But now...”

Rhodan laid his hand on Chaktor’s lower arm. “All that will happen. Not today, not tomorrow...but it will happen.”

“By Thort!” was all Chaktor said.

They spent the rest of the journey in silence until the alien stood up saying, “Our station!” and told the humans to follow him.

They had barely disembarked before the train disappeared again. Rhodan assumed it would be turning back as fast as possible to pick up refugees trying to get out of the city.

Chaktor inspected the corridors leading upward and let the humans know that the way was clear. Rhodan was relieved that he did not have to make use of Wuriu’s and Tschubai’s abilities to find a way aboveground. He would have had great difficulty asking the teleporter to jump blind into the middle of a war zone. And Wuriu’s powers were not strong enough to see through meters and meters of rubble to find a safe way out.

The escalators had stopped running. This station was much larger than those on the edges of the city where they had first gone underground. It was obvious that they were in the center of the city now. More passengers mean more options to change trains, more transport resources.

They had managed to climb up more than half the stairs when they heard the dull thunder of an explosion. The Red Palace was still under attack.

Why are these madmen still fighting? Even as the question went through his head, Rhodan knew the answer: *This is their last line of defense. The Ferrons cannot retreat one step more, because the Red Palace is right behind them.*

Chaktor remained standing. “What now?”

“The stairwell acts like a megaphone,” Rhodan explained. “The explosions must be close to the exit, although they sound so loud to us. Wuriu?” He turned to the seer. “Can you identify anything?”

Wuriu closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them again, they looked unfocused. The mutant looked up through the stairwell shaft to see if he could recognize anything happening on the outside that was hidden from them by the walls of the corridor. “It’s still too far away. It looks as if the cellars of some building or other are located behind these walls.”

“As long as the cellars have not collapsed, then we can hope that there is stuff lying around aboveground that can provide us with cover. Let’s go!”

The others cautiously followed Rhodan up the stairs. The sounds of explosions became louder and louder until they could hardly hear each other talk anymore. When daylight became clearly visible through the opening of the exit, Rhodan ordered them to stop again.

“Wuriu?”

The mutant concentrated as his gaze wandered along the wall.

After a few seconds, he shook his head briefly, as if to be able to see more clearly. “Next to the exit is a high-rise that looks to be undamaged.”

Rhodan weighed their chances. “How far is it from the exit here to the entrance of the building?”

“Twelve, maybe fifteen meters,” the other man answered.

“We can manage that.” He looked at his companions. “We’ll sneak over to the exit of the subway. With Wuriu’s help, we’ll take a look at our surroundings before moving to the building. I don’t think the residents will be there, so we’ll make it to the entrance and then use the chance to check out the situation aboveground.”

“And the Topsidans?” Chaktor asked.

“The building has survived all of their attacks so far. I’m hoping it will survive another ten minutes.” He looked at the others. “Any other suggestions?”

There were none.

A little later, the group was moving slowly towards the exit. The building Wuriu had seen appeared to be a residential one. When asked about this, Chaktor explained that it wasn’t unusual. High-ranking government officials resided in extortionately priced apartments close to the seat of government. With a bit of luck, this might be one of them.

“I could jump over there with all of you,” Tschubai noted.

“That would be three jumps, each time taking someone with you, at a distance of about twenty to thirty meters. Would you be fit enough to continue after that?”

The teleporter took a critical look at the building. “A fast series of short jumps should be doable. But after that…they would be the last jumps for a while.”

Rhodan thought it over. “No, I think we’d be better to save your powers for later when they might be our only way out. It’s

important we aren't seen from above. I assume the Topsidans are monitoring the area from the air. Even if they're not dropping bombs continuously—it's not in their interest to allow the troops of Thort to get reinforcements. But would they pursue a few men who were just trying to flee? I don't think so."

"Who's going first?" Wuriu asked.

"Ras and I will go first. If everything goes well and we manage to open the door, you and Chaktor can follow us. Okay?"

He looked at all of them. Tschubai and Sengu nodded. Chaktor did not seem to be very familiar with that gesture yet.

"That was a yes from them," Rhodan explained.

"Then it's a yes from me too," the Ferron said. He tried to nod his assent, but it looked very weird when he did it.

Rhodan and Tschubai crept towards the exit, making sure there was no one around. Then they sprinted the short distance to the building. When they got there, Tschubai was breathing heavily.

"The higher gravity," he gasped. "You underestimate how difficult it is to just get up and start running."

Rhodan smiled. As a pilot, he was used to exposing his body to physically strenuous movements on short notice.

The door to the building opened automatically when they came close to it. Rhodan quickly glanced up. He couldn't see any door cameras. However, he realized that, like on Earth, such devices had probably been made so small that they were barely visible to the naked eye.

The two men entered the lobby. Unfamiliar flowers were wilting in a vase, and an open book was lying on the table. They listened briefly but couldn't hear any noises in the building. Either security was more relaxed here or the residents had fled as fast as they could and had not bothered to activate the locking systems.

Rhodan gestured for the others to follow them, and Chaktor and

Wuriu arrived a few seconds later.

“We have to get right to the top, to get a better view,” Rhodan said.

Chaktor passed them. He glanced at the control panel for the elevator. “It still seems to be working.”

“Anything but stairs in this gravity, please!” Tschubai said with a dramatic sigh.

The elevator door opened.

“Stairs won’t be necessary,” Wuriu said, hoping he was right. He was the first to enter the elevator. “Gentlemen, tenth floor, Ferron fashions.”

Chaktor was the only one not smiling when the others entered the elevator.

They chose an apartment where they would have a clear view of the Red Palace. They had little difficulty breaking down the door thanks to Tschubai, who kicked the lock twice with his foot.

“Where did you learn that?” Wuriu asked him.

“We sometimes had to forcefully enter buildings in Sudan to help people who were no longer able to open the door themselves. That’s where I learned it.”

“When was that?”

“In another life, Wuriu. In another life...”

The apartment was vacant. Despite appearances, Rhodan made them spread out to search the rooms. Soon after, the three humans met up again in the hallway.

“A bathroom and a kind of prayer room, both without windows, but empty,” Tschubai reported.

“Bedroom, bedroom, study, kitchen. No living beings. Windows,

but facing in the wrong direction," the seer briefly informed them.

"Chaktor!" Rhodan went in search of the Ferron, who had gone through the door at the end of the hallway.

"I'm here," his voice said, coming from that direction.

The humans opened the door to the last room cautiously. Chaktor was standing at the window, his hands clasped together against his lower back. He did not turn around when they entered. The ceiling light had not been turned on. The sunlight of Vega shone in through the window, and they could only make out silhouettes.

Columns of smoke rose up above the city to the left and the right. And everywhere they looked, they could see fires where there had been recent explosions. The fact that they could not hear a sound from outside was spooky. The windows seemed to be completely insulated against noise.

Rhodan looked across the room. It looked like the living room of a typical Ferron family. There were photos on the wall. A couple on holiday together. The sun in the background did not fit in with the surface of Ferrol; it was too small. So the couple must have vacationed on one of the more distant planets. Perhaps the ninth planet in the system. Next to that was a photo of the same couple, but a few years older, and with two sons and a daughter. The same five people could be seen in three other photos. *Also on holiday*, Rhodan thought to himself.

The other wall was full of books. *A civilization of readers.* Rhodan's eyes moved appreciatively along the row of texts. They weren't mass goods, so the people here seemed to believe that not only was it good to read, but also liked it when books felt pleasant to hold. He could see bookmarks of different colors in several of them.

The wall straight ahead had a large panorama window. Chaktor was looking out of it, and he didn't turn for a second to flance at the others.

Rhodan stepped up beside him an the Ferron pointed towards the center of the city.

“There!”

What Rhodan saw took his breath away. The Red Palace was gigantic. *Like a mixture of the Potala Palace and the Tibetan red mountain, the Vatican, Angkor Wat, and about ten times the size of Manhattan.*

But it was not its sheer size that bowled him over—it was the bright sparkling in the air. In the center of the city, an energy shield had been installed all around the Red Palace.

“Where did the Ferrons get a protective shield generator?” Tschubai had come up silently behind him.

“They probably managed to get it off the Topsidans somehow.”

“Ras, I don’t think the Ferrons have had the time to acquire a device like that and install it here.”

“Do you have an explanation, Perry?” Wuriu asked.

“No. The Ferrons are more technically advanced than we are, but I don’t believe they have protective shields. Stolen from the Topsidans, I would imagine.”

Rhodan looked at the scene before him. At its center was the Red Palace, which had an energy shield spread over it that did not stretch much farther than the edges of the complex. The shield’s range was easy to identify—the buildings outside of it were damaged, severely if not completely. The buildings within were in perfect shape. Inside the shield they could see streets with magnificent-looking architecture, which turned into piles of rubble and ruins whenever a street passed through the shield.

Rhodan could see a flickering out of the corner of his eye. He took a closer look. “The shield is not stable!”

The others now saw the same thing he did. Colored lines spread across the shield whenever bombs hit its apex.

“It looks like the Topsidans are trying to overload it.”

“And they’re doing it without atomic bombs...”

“Yes, Wuriu. But that doesn’t mean they won’t still use that option.”

“I can only hope they don’t do it. This beautiful city...” The Japanese man fell silent.

“We must bring you to the Thort as soon as we can.” Chaktor had emerged from his deep silence.

The Thort is trapped in his last ring of defense. While the Topsidans haven’t yet broken through the shield, who knows how long things can go on like this? Rhodan thought. *But anything is better than not acting. Crest and the Arkonides provided an opportunity, and I took it. Who knows what the Thort has to offer?*“We’ll find our way through to the Thort,” he said. “We owe that to this world.”

It was an easy decision to make, but it was a great deal more difficult to put into practice. Rhodan collected his companions around the large table in the living room. The next twenty minutes were filled with a lively discussion about how they could find their way into the Red Palace.

Wuriu suggested using the tunnels and shafts of the underground railway system again. However, the shield was probably a perfect sphere that also worked underground, the remaining Ferron defense troops would surely shoot at anything that tried to approach that way.

Tschubai held back. He knew his powers were useless against an energy shield.

Chaktor remained silent. He was no doubt thinking about his family. He repeatedly reached his right hand into his breast pocket, where he kept the photos of them, but this was neither the time nor the place for that.

Rhodan was not the type to get embroiled in long discussions

when it was vital to make decisions fast. He walked up to the window and inspected the shield again. Something seemed to have grabbed his attention, because he did not notice that the others had stopped talking and had come up behind him.

“One…two…three…four…five…now! One…two…three…four…”

“Perry, what are you counting?”

“Look, Ras.” Rhodan pointed to a place on the wall of the building, which seemed to be in the process of collapsing. Another piece of wall broke away. Rhodan immediately began counting again, and once he had slowly counted to five, they could see a brief flash at the place where the piece of wall had been.

“What’s that?”

“The shield obviously needs a second to adapt to changes. From here, it looks like it reconstitutes itself every ten to twelve seconds, which means it can only react to a gap then.”

“You mean we can use that moment to pass through it?”

“Yes.”

“And how will we get rid of a piece of wall?”

“We’ll think of something…”

Less than ten minutes later, they were standing in front of said wall. Thanks to Wuriu, they were sure this wall was exactly what they needed for their purpose. It was unstable, not too thick, but high enough that the resulting gap was big enough for them to get through.

The attacks by the Topsidans were becoming more frequent. They had obviously noticed that repeated attacks on the apex of the shield would destabilize it sooner or later.

“We have to hurry!” Chaktor was becoming increasingly nervous. The attacks on the Red Palace, the fact that the life of the Thort was in serious danger, was extremely difficult for him.

Tschubai and Rhodan grabbed the Ferron version of emergency axes, which they had borrowed from the elevator engine room. Rhodan hit the first small hole in the wall. Then he waited until the shield had reformed in the gap again.

"Go!"

He and Tschubai started hammering the wall like crazy, and the stone soon loosened beneath their blows.

"One...two..." Rhodan counted in his head. Suddenly, a large chunk of wall collapsed. "Come on!"

Tschubai jumped through, still clutching the ax in one hand. Wuriu came after him, then Chaktor. Rhodan was last, and the shield reformed itself directly behind him.

"That was extremely close!" Sengu commented.

"Where to, Chaktor?" Rhodan said, turning to their guide.

The Ferron soon got his bearings and hurried ahead of them into the center of the city.

The humans had little opportunity to appreciate the magnificent architecture. The shield flickered and glowed above them. St first, the Topsidian bombs were being thrown individually and at intervals of ten to twelve seconds, but this soon changed. The invaders started throwing several bombs at once, and at shorter intervals, followed by a break of up to two minutes. It was obvious that their strategy was yielding some success. The flickering of the shield lasted a little longer after every attack, and the Terrans felt the detonations were getting louder every time.

Not a living soul was to be seen on the streets. Chaktor hurried ahead. He stopped and stood for a second whenever he passed a crossing, got his bearings again, and then continued running. Rhodan followed him, running and stopping at the same intervals.

Run, run, run, then bombs hailing down. A brief pause, a deep breath. The noise faded and the flickering of the shield subsided. Run, run, run. Then renewed bombing.

At first, he kept count, but he gave up after he had been through about twelve cycles.

A glance ahead told him that they were very close to the center. How far had they already run? He could hear Wuriu's heavy breathing behind him. The small man already had a few kilos too many under normal gravity. It was easy to see how difficult running must have been for him under these circumstances.

They turned another corner and Chaktor stopped abruptly. Wuriu nearly ran into Tschubai but managed to stop at the last second.

Rhodan would have expected to see the soldiers standing before them in a historical film about 18th century Europe, but not here on Ferrol. The tall Ferrons were wearing metal armor on their upper bodies. What were they called again? Cuirasses!

On their cuirasses were Ferron signs and symbols that Rhodan could not decipher. The soldiers also wore helmets with plumes of white and blue feathers. Their uniforms were rounded off by white pants with a blue stripe on the side and leather boots. They had a sheath for some kind of weapon attached to one side of their belts, which looked very much like an Earthly sable. The other side of the belt had a holster for a pistol, showing that they also had modern weapons. When the four turned the corner, the guards immediately reached for those weapons.

Chaktor lifted his arms—obviously, a sign on Ferrol, a universal gesture that meant *We do not come as enemies*. He had turned his open palms towards the guards. Rhodan, Sengu and Tschubai did the same.

What must we look like to them? Rhodan thought. *A pale-skinned, a sallow-skinned and a dark-skinned human with a blue Ferron right below the protective shield around the Thort...*

"Who are you?" The voice of the Ferron officer, otherwise used to giving orders, sounded a little confused.

"My name is Chaktor. I am accompanying the light! In our hour

of greatest hardship, my companions came down from the firmament. Now I am accompanied by those beings from the past. We want—no, we *must* go to the Thort."

The officer eyed the small group, a little unsure. "I don't know if that's a very good idea."

"We don't have much time," Rhodan said, interrupting. "The energy shield will not hold out forever. And if it collapses, it could be too late."

"The light?" The officer looked skeptical.

"If we discuss things much longer, you'll never find out if we *could* have helped. Because when the energy shield fails, we will all be nothing but ash and light."

"You are right," the commander said to Rhodan. "I will bring you to the chambers of the Thort. After that, it's out of my hands."

They followed the guards through the huge entrance hall decorated with mosaics that obviously depicted scenes from Ferron history. Rhodan unfortunately did not have time to inspect them closer. Time constraints allowed for nothing more than a fleeting glance. *Another time,* he thought.

He went up a marble staircase, then through a side entrance into a narrow corridor, which was obviously designed for the staff, not for visitors to the Red Palace. After a few meters, they came to the door of a small elevator.

"Maximum of four people allowed," the guard told them. "I'll let them know below that you are coming. May the light be victorious."

Rhodan almost expected him to click his heels together at that point and lift his hand to his helmet, but that seemed to be something in which the Ferrons differed from humans.

Chaktor got into the elevator with the three of them. There was only one stop to choose from. The Ferron pressed the button and the doors closed. The elevator descended with a slight hissing

sound.

A few seconds later, the door opened into a hallway. They walked a few meters along it before encountering two guards standing in front of another door.

"You have been announced. Along this hallway to the door at the end." The soldier on the left stood aside, opening the door wide with one arm.

The Terrans hastened past the two guards, who closed the door behind them. After about twenty yards, they reached the end of the hallway. *Only one more door...*

Rhodan held his breath. He was about to look the ruler of an entire solar system in the eye. He could only hope there would still be enough time to do something against the Topsidan attacks.

He opened the door and stopped dead in his tracks, surprised. There was a machine in the middle of the room that Rhodan could not identify. It looked like something out of a science fiction film. Even though he had gained some experience with Arkonide technology, he was still surprised to see an archway, strange aggregates, operating panels...and he could just make out the wide back of a Ferron wearing a blue and white coat disappearing into the flickering archway.

"Stop him," Chaktor called out to the Ferron man standing next to the archway. "Halt! The strangers from the stars must speak to the Thort."

At that very second, an explosion shook the room.

"The shield has collapsed!" The Ferron man before them turned in panic to the machine's controls. "No! Too much...energy."

Rhodan reacted immediately. "Back from the controls! Back! The energy will seek a pathway!"

But it was too late. A burst of energy came out of the archway and, against all laws of nature, a flash shot upwards. A piece of the ceiling came away. The Ferron was still standing at the control

panel as if he had been turned to stone. A light, which was reminiscent of St. Elmo's fire started creeping from the control panel up his arm.

"Careful!"

The Ferron turned around halfway and took a step away from the control panel. Rhodan rushed forward to pull him farther away from the panel, but he was too late, and the man soon was buried under a pile of rubble as the ceiling collapsed.

3.

Under Water

The Azores; August 3, 2036

The submarine slid silently through the depths of the Atlantic. The motor in the stern provided the energy needed to drive the boat deeper and deeper against the water pressure. It also powered the spotlight on the bow, which broke its way through the otherwise total deep-sea darkness. This created two cones of light before the ship, which disappeared completely about twenty to thirty meters ahead of the sub, making it impossible to see anything beyond that. The three young people were pressed up against the two viewing windows in the bow.

Timothy seemed a little nervous. His face shone with a childish enthusiasm as he looked at the strange colorful fish darting into the beam of the spotlight before dashing off again into the darkness.His long hair was tied back in a ponytail that flickered across his shoulders whenever he made hectic movements of his eyes and head—back and forth following yet another species of deep-sea fauna. He wore a blue shirt, thrown on casually. It was not tucked into his jeans but hung loosely around his hips. His shoes were neat, but not made of leather, which would have been unthinkable to him. Although he only wore synthetic materials, you could hardly tell that they were not made of real leather. He wore a dark jacket, which made him look like he was on the way to a nephew's confirmation.

Julian was about ten centimeters taller than Timothy. He used this advantage to look over his friend's shoulder every time the other made some sound to express his delight at having discovered a new species of fish. Julian's brown hair was cut close to his head. He did not have the kind of face that stuck out at first glance, except for his eyes, which were constantly shooting to and fro, from one side to the pther. They clearly revealed the lively intelligence behind them and a curiosity like that of a child.

His clothing was expensive. And he knew how to dress. He wore a tie, but otherwise he could have played the role of a young lawyer or the perfect charmer in any number of American or European holo shows. A perfectly sitting shirt, perfectly sitting trousers, perfectly sitting shoes. Everything color coordinated so that it all matched the dark-blue jacket. The only unusual thing was a small, silver rocket that decorated the collar of his shirt. He had bought it years ago on the net, a silver needle with a silver rocket that had been issued many, many years ago for members of the press who visited the Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

Every now and again Julian looked over to the third person in the room to study her silently. Mildred was an exceptionally beautiful woman, at least in his eyes. Long black hair framed her thin, expressionless face, out of which dark eyes looked curiously into the world. Her body was slim and wiry, the figure of an athlete. She wore a tight polo-neck shirt that emphasized her figure, with narrow trousers and boots. She had a woolen jacket over that —Mildred had always had quirky tastes in clothing. At the moment, she looked like what he imagined a literature professor would look like, although he knew she had actually wanted to become a virologist.

Don't judge a book by its cover, he thought. *Many people are unaware of what is concealed beneath that exterior.* Julian studied her again lovingly as she stared out of the second window lost in thought.

"Madness!" Mildred said, commenting on the view. "Absolute madness. This here is no doubt one of the last areas in the depths of the ocean that we haven't destroyed yet." The other two said nothing, too engrossed in the world outside the window. Mildred

spoke again. “Did you know that Columbus was in the Azores?”

“On his way there or back?” Timothy asked, without turning away from the window.

“His first return journey. And with his last ship he passed the Azores on his way to the European mainland,” Mildred answered.

Timothy shook his head, causing his ponytail to fly around wildly. “I don’t think this is the right time to think about shipwrecks.”

“We’re completely safe here,” Julian said in an attempt to calm his friend. “State-of-the-art technology. Merging the elements of a boat with a submarine, resulting in different but interlinked drive possibilities. And there were deep-sea dives even in the 20th century that went much deeper than this.”

“It still doesn’t mean I have to like it...”

“Hey, Timothy, don’t you want to venture into space? Spaceships are nothing but metal tin cans, and their passengers are exposed to more dangers than we are here under water.”

“But up there you can see the stars...”

Mildred interjected, “But here you can see all sorts of different things. The deep sea is so full of life. Look, over there!” She pointed to the edges of the area that was visible to them. The seabed shone red and white before them.

“A coral reef.” She was so excited, she was almost glued to the glass. Fish darted in and out of the coral everywhere.

“It looks like an overgrown ruin where the fish are playing around.” Timothy said, unable to hold his tongue.

“More than one researcher believed that Atlantis was located near the Azores,” Julian commented.

“Atlantis. I suppose you’re going to tell me Captain Nemo’s island was also near the Azores?” Timothy was skeptical.

“Unlike the works of Jules Verne, the legend of Atlantis probably had a real background. And Captain Nemo’s island was supposedly in the Pacific, not near the Azores,” Julian lectured them. “Just think about how many myths speak of a land in the west that promises eternal youth.”

“A myth that people pursued again and again without ever finding the land in question.”

“Hey, Timothy, how do you know there isn’t a house somewhere in which immortal conquistadors have been living on the interest from the gold they stole from the locals?” Julian challenged him.

“Ugh.” Timothy was not convinced. “So what do they do to stop themselves dying of boredom?”

“And the shadow above us is no doubt the bottom of the Flying Dutchman?” Mildred had a more practical nature than the two young men.

Both of them glanced at her in surprise. Then they looked towards where she was pointing. There really was a shadow above them.

“That’s no ship. We’re far too deep for shadows from the surface.” Julian looked up, but all he could see in the darkness was a kind of dark shape that seemed to be right above the submarine.

“That’s not a ship.” Mildred had her nose pressed against the glass. “I read somewhere that the Japanese have even genetically *improved* sea creatures in their campaign against global hunger. Apparently, they’ve enlarged whales to increase their catch quantities.”

“Project Leviathan, I assume.”

Mildred poked Julian in the side with her elbow. “Don’t annoy me!”

Julian turned away. “That hurt!”

“It was supposed to!”

Timothy interrupted the two of them. “Hey, lovebirds, there’s something upfront that looks like it doesn’t belong here.”

The young couple fell silent immediately and went back to their lookout positions at the windows. The ray of light from their sub showed the outline of something in the darkness ahead. At first, it was only a vague artificial structure among all the deep-sea structures that looked perfectly natural. Then the shape emerged from of the shadows as the submarine moved closer and the lights illuminated it fully.

“A dome! That must be the underwater dome.” Mildred was really excited.

“And what’s that at the back of it?” Timothy asked.

Everyone was silent for a moment, peering into the darkness. “The wreck of a spaceship,” Julian guessed. “That must be the spaceship wreck. Wow, that’s the last place on Earth I would land a spaceship.”

“It probably landed on Atlantis, which went down itself before the Azores, which is why the wreck is down here now. And the coral reef out there is sprawled across the boulevards of Atlantis.”

“Mildred, you never fail to surprise me.” Julian obviously hadn’t caught that she wasn’t serious.

A voice suddenly roared out of the wall above their heads. “Ladies and gentlemen, please get ready to leave the ship. In a few minutes, we will reach the hangar of the deep-sea dome.”

Julian shrugged. “Oh well, we’ll have to enjoy the view another time.”

“I would have preferred the stars,” Timothy commented.

Julian turned towards the hatch to get his things. “Me too,” he said to his friends before leaving the room.

The hangar of the dome opened before them. Technicians were busy inspecting the various objects. Everybody was busy in action,

and only one man was standing waiting calmly a few steps away from the airlock. Julian watched him closer; after all, he seemed to be something like a welcoming committee.

The man was at least sixty years old. His body was bent forward as if it had been forced that way by the burdens of life. A crown of white hair was all that was left from his last visit to a hairdresser. His clothes were very conservative and even a little old-fashioned. They were well looked after, but Julian—who had an eye for everything to do with clothing—could see that they had been out of fashion for at least ten, if not twenty years. *A very, very conservative appearance.* But the man's face had a friendly expression.

Timothy and Mildred had also stopped in their tracks and were watching the older man. *At least he's got wrinkles*, Mildred thought looking at him. *And not immovable features turned to stone by injections and treatments to give him a fake look of youthfulness*.

The man did not approach them. He remained standing until they had walked a few steps in his direction. Then he cleared his throat as if to make sure that the three of them were looking at him.

"Hello! My name is Allan D. Mercant. You're lucky someone spoke in your favor, persuading me to sacrifice exactly five minutes of my time. So?" He gave his watch, which he had removed from his pocket, a theatrical look as he spoke.

"The person who spoke in our favor was no doubt Homer Gershwin Adams," Mildred said to break the ice.

"Right," Mercant answered. "You have precisely four minutes and fifty seconds."

"Listen. We believe we've discovered something important."

The old man looked at her. "Help us against the Fantan? Is Rhodan going to be popping by again? Bringing me the key for the treasure chest lying under here, are you?"

"Come on, Timothy, explain it to him," Mildred demanded.

"Four-and-half-minutes," the old man informed them.

“Hmm.” Timothy cleared his throat loudly. “We’ve analyzed some data. Perhaps you’ve heard of the SETI@home-project?”

“Began in 1999, now on the fourth platform. Looks for signals from extraterrestrials. Four minutes left.”

The old man was obviously not willing to partake in a friendly chat with them. Timothy looked over at Julian, his eyes seeking help.

“We,” Julian began, “or more precisely, Timothy here has been taking a closer look at the SETI data over the past week.” He looked sheepishly at his two companions, but neither of them made a move to speak. “Actually, it was the data from the Arecibo radio telescope in Puerto Rico. We checked the data, and there are irregular impulses, which we believe to be of Arkonide origin.”

“Aha. Three-and-a-half minutes. The data from the *Aetron*,” Mercant commented.

“No, that’s what’s interesting!” Timothy cut in. “It’s from this ship here!” He pointed at the recon craft that was standing in the middle of the hangar.

“Quinius’s ship…” Mercant remarked.

“Yes. This ship explored the solar system and automatically transmitted all rangefinder data to the *Aetron*. The data was sent at an extremely low transmission strength, meaning it was hidden in the cosmic background noise. But we were lucky. We discovered the data and decoded it.”

“Great,” Mercant said grumpily. “So we finally know more about how the universe works. I don’t understand why Adams insisted we meet. Extraterrestrials are in the process of stealing everything on Earth, Rhodan has disappeared, we’re still trying to decode the Arkonide technology—there’s no time for orbital data and close-ups of the—”

Julian interrupted him. “That’s right, but that’s not what we discovered. The data provides information about a station on

Titan."

"Titan is one of Saturn's moons. The biggest moon among more than sixty Saturn moons." Timothy could no longer contain his enthusiasm.

Mercant thought for a second. Then he closed his pocket watch. "Good. Maybe Adams knew what he was doing. But how can that help? We're here." He pointing at the dome. "And we have more than enough to do. I don't know how an alien base on Titan could help us."

"But we could go there!" It was Julian who took a step forward as he spoke.

Mercant looked at him, surprised. Julian pointed towards the spaceship at the center of the hangar.

"This recon craft was already there, and it could fly there again."

"What did you say?" Mercant was taken aback by the young man's brash manner.

"Like I said, it could fly there. We're certain we can fly it."

Mercant stood rooted to the spot as he had been struck by lightning. "I should take you right now and throw you out of here. If needs be without a submarine." Then he looked at the three young people in silence for a few seconds. "But I must admit, you've got guts! Respect."

He took hold of his jacket collar and spoke into a microphone that was obviously hidden there. "Mercant here. Give the three youngsters in the hangar a cabin somewhere in the dome. And keep them busy so they don't get up to no good!" He looked up again. "Thank— you for the information. Some of my colleagues will take care of the data, and they will no doubt have a few questions for you."

Then he turned around without another word and left the three of them standing there silent and astonished.

4.

Attack on the Topsidans

Ferrol, Thorta

Rhodan rushed to the place where the Ferron lay buried under a pile of rubble. He began to immediately remove the debris piece by piece.

The door flew open behind him. The two guards, who should have remained in the corridor, ran into the room. They looked around desperately.

"The Thort?"

"The Thort is in safety," Chaktor informed them. "He managed to escape through the transmitter."

Rhodan was listening carefully. *So the device has a name...transmitter. What kind of device was this so-called transmitter?* His thoughts were interrupted by the guards.

"And what are the *others* doing here?" They looked at the three humans digging in the rubble with a look of disapproval.

"A technician was buried by the blast."

The guards examined the pile of rubble skeptically. Chaktor relieved them of the decision about whether or not to help. "We're fine here. What's the situation like out there?"

"The last information we received was that the energy shield has collapsed. It shimmered one last time and then it was gone. Topsidian ships are landing in the Red Palace and ground troops are pouring out of them. We won't be safe for much longer..."

As if to emphasize the words, dull thudding sounds could be

heard from above.

“They detonated the gates to the palace,” one of the guards reported.

“What now?” Chaktor asked.

The guards looked at each other for several seconds. Nobody in the room said a word. Then the guards appeared to have made a decision.

“We’re going back up to the surface. The Topsidans will conquer the Red Palace, but we will make sure they never forget this day.”

Rhodan looked up briefly from his digging. “Don’t you think enough blood has been spilled?”

The guards ignored the human’s question.

“The Topsidans will assume there are no longer any civilians in the Red Palace,” Chaktor commented. “They’ll kill everyone who gets in their way. Even if the soldiers are taken prisoner...if the Ferron resistance is right, there is no way to escape the Topsidian prisons.”

“Perry, don’t forget,” Tschubai interjected, “even if the Ferrons might have a chance, we don’t. The lizards will know immediately that we are not like the other Ferrons. And I don’t want to end my life as a prisoner.”

“Nor do I, Ras. But before I leave this room, I want to be sure that I’ve done all I can to help this man.” He pointed towards the pile of rubble. Then he turned to the two guards and said, “We’re fine on our own, thanks. We wish you all the best!”

“All the best for you—may the light remain!” With these cryptic words, the two guards left the room.

“Was that wise?” Chaktor asked after the guards had departed.

“I don’t know,” Rhodan answered honestly.

“I could get us out of here!” Tschubai suggested.

“Thanks for offering, Ras. But where would we escape to? To another room inside the Red Palace? It’s no use going into the city, and the entire planet is in the hands of the Topsidans. We would be letting those down who need our help more than ever. No, that’s not the answer.”

“Perry, I’ve got him.” With Chaktor’s help, Wuriu had managed to lift a large slab from the buried Ferron. His legs and his left arm were still below the rubble. Apart from a few scrapes, his face was uninjured, but his eyes were closed.

Chaktor kneeled down next to him immediately and held the palm of his hand in front of his face. “He’s still breathing!”

“Where there’s life, there’s hope. Come on, Ras, let’s remove the rest of this debris,” the Japanese man said.

The pair lifted stone after stone off the Ferron. The more of his body they freed, the clearer it became that he was extremely tall for the species.

“I would say he is more than one meter eighty,” Tschubai commented.

“An elderly man,” Wuriu noted. “If he were human, I would put him at about sixty, perhaps sixty-five.”

Rhodan looked at the injured alien. In human terms, he indeed looked to be older but his body seemed well-trained. He had a small belly, but that was normal for someone of his age. His hair was cut short and copper-colored, but he was unusually tall and slim. The blue skin made it difficult to guess his age from his face. The small lines were harder to recognize because of his skin color, but a closer look showed that his face was covered in many small wrinkles.

Facing the seer, Rhodan said: “I would also place him at about sixty.”

Chaktor looked at the man’s clothes, which were slowly becoming visible below the dust and dirt. “Old, perhaps, Earthling,

and not unimportant." He pointed at the symbol on the man's chest, which apparently represented Ferrol with its two moons—a large circle with two smaller circles below it.

"Chaktor, is there something we should know about this man?"

"Later, Rhodan, later."

Again explosions could be heard, this time much louder than before.

"They're forcing their way through the corridors."

"I'm not leaving without at least trying to help this man." Rhodan insisted. He turned to the other humans. "You two, can try to block the door to gain more time for us!"

Just then, the man lying on the floor opened his eyes. His face immediately twisted in pain. "What happened?" he gasped. His eyes became clearer, but there was a look of confusion in them as he saw the three humans.

"No need for alarm," Chaktor said to the injured man. "These strangers have come to bring back the light."

"The Thort?"

"Managed to escape."

Again the dull thudding sound of detonations could be heard, this time accompanied by gunfire. The soldiers of the palace guard seemed to be fighting for every meter of the Red Palace.

The injured Ferron, who was still lying on the ground, took Chaktor's arm and pulled his head down so that Chaktor's ear was right next to his mouth. He began whispering quietly to Chaktor.

"No!" Shocked, Chaktor tried to release the man's grip on him.

"You must do it! Nobody else can do it now!" the injured Ferron said with some urgency.

Chaktor was breathing heavily. “Good!” Then he bent down again to his fellow Ferron.

The humans were only marginally paying attention to the scene. They repeatedly fell silent to listen to the sounds coming from outside.

“I could still jump with you all...” the teleporter offered.

“Take all of us, one after another, to a place where there’s just as much fighting going on? No. Apart from that, the discussion those two are having”—Rhodan nodded at the two Ferrons—“looks like it’s pretty important.”

They looked over at the aliens. One of them was lying on the floor, only slightly freed from the dust and rubble. The other was kneeling down next to him, his lips pressed up close to the wounded man’s ear.

All of a sudden, Chaktor straightened. “The Light shall return.” The wounded man had closed his eyes again, no doubt because speaking had cost him all the energy he could muster.

“What’s your plan?”

Chaktor went over to the control panel of the transmitters. “I’m going to attempt something to which I am not entitled, but at the moment, it seems like all the usual regulations are suspended. I am going to set up this device to allow us to escape from here.”

“Get away? To theThort?”

“I wish I knew that myself. I asked *him* that too, but he passed out before he could answer.”

“Are you sure you know how to operate this thing?” Rhodan asked.

Chaltor looked up at him, tired. “Do we have a choice?”

The sounds of fighting were getting louder. Tschubai and Wuriu had positioned themselves at the door in an attempt to find out

what was going on in the corridor.

“They’re coming closer. We have to hurry!”

The heroic defenses of the palace guard were obviously close to defeat. No more shots could be heard.

The members of the palace guard are dying, but they’re still not giving up, Rhodan thought to himself.

His human companions piled up more rubble from the collapsed ceiling against the door, but it would hardly be able to resist an attack by energy weapons.

“Chaktor! How much time do you need?”

“I’m almost there, Rhodan, almost there.”

Chaktor hectically activated more switches on the control panel. A buzzing sound filled the air. The archway changed color, the crackling of electricity ignited the little balls of fluff that had settled everywhere when the roof collapsed.

“It’s working!”

Flashes burst out of the archway, then everything seemed to stabilize. Rhodan knelt down next to the injured Ferron and carefully lifted up the unconscious man. Standing was difficult, not only because of his increased body weight, but also the extra weight of the injured Ferron.

No worse than the pressure during the launch to the Moon, he thought to motivate himself.

Tschubai and Wuriu moved back from the door. They could hear footsteps outside, and then someone was trying to kick the door down. At least the pile of rubble prevented them from achieving that with a single kick.

“Get away from the door!”

Both of them jumped back in response to Rhodan’s orders, and

not a second too late. The door turned a glowing red around the lock.

Chaktor took up position before the transmitter. Rhodan followed him, carrying the unconscious man, with Tschubai and Wuriu behind them.

“And now?” Rhodan asked.

“Now we go through the transmitter.”

“Where will it take us?”

“Away from here,” Chaktor said laconically.

“Anywhere is better than here,” Wuriu remarked.

Chaktor and Rhodan were the first to step through and disappear. Sengu and Tschubai were right behind them.

5.

Never dream of home

Earth; August 3, 2036

It was night in the underwater dome. Not night in the conventional sense, because sunlight never penetrated that deep. The dome and the ocean floor around it were illuminated by artificial light. And it was also artificial light that regulated the passing of time down for them.

The twenty-four hours of the day were divided up into three shifts. One eight-hour shift was for working, one was for sleeping, and the last was for free time. Therefore, you would expect a third of the people present to be out and about at any given time, either exploring the dome or involved in leisure activities. You would expect to see them finding ways to pass the time.

But that was not the case.

The people's routines and habits, which had been influenced all their lives by the sun, continued in the same pattern below water. There was a *night* down here. And although it did not come from the rhythm of the three shifts or in the way that the lighting was managed, and also not from the movement of the water, it was clearly felt by the people in the dome. It was as if they had brought the same patterns they followed on land with them all the way down here. The result was that *at night*, it seemed wholly natural that there was a lot less going on than during the *day*.

The dome was big. The military men and women estimated that you could easily station a thousand people there for an extended period of time. And that could even be stretched to several thousand for several weeks in emergency situations. For this reason, the station always seemed to be under-occupied. In some parts there was a lot of hustle and bustle, while in others there were usually no more than two or three people going about their work. Things had not fully come back to life here again, if there ever had been a time when it was fully occupied and bustling with life.

There were loud places and there were quiet places. And there were several places where a constant humming noise could be heard.

Crest sat in the transmitter room on a folding chair, which no doubt came from the military inventory of some European nation. Chairs of this kind, which the humans referred to as "director's chairs," also existed on Arkon. However, on Arkon, nobody would ever have thought of giving a military item a name that was also used in the cultural scene.

Crest leaned his back on the band of fabric that was stretched between the two metal rods that formed the backrest in this kind of chair. His arms lay on both armrests, and his legs were stretched out in front of him. He occasionally lifted his arms from the rests, spread his fingers, and pressed both hands together to release the pressure in his fingertips before pulling his hands apart again. He repeated this every few minutes—lifted his arms, spread out his fingers, pressed both hands together, and released the pressure.

Crest breathed calmly and evenly. His eyes were closed as he

listened to his surroundings. Every now and then, he was sure he could hear a low noise. A kind of humming sound that seemed to exist at the very edges of his hearing range. Then he opened his eyes and examined the room. But he could see nothing that might be causing the noise. The lamps were on, spreading their white light across the room, but they were completely silent. He could see no other technical devices, no matter how much he searched to find out where the humming sound might be coming from.

The air supply worked silently, as did the heating. Their aggregates weren't located in this room but somewhere far removed in the depths of the water dome where he could not hear them. There was nothing here that could hum...except for one object, which clearly no longer worked and therefore could not be the source of the noise.

Crest let his thoughts wander as he looked at the rest of the transmitter in the middle of the room again and again. A transmitter. Finally. He was not only searching; he had tracked something down that was of considerable significance at last. They had achieved so much, were so close to their destination, but...

Crest suddenly heard footsteps. He didn't look up. He kept his eyes trained on the transmitter, the machine that promised him a way out...away from this planet, away from all his worries. But it didn't work. *Like so many things here,* he thought.

"Crest?"

The Arkonide did not turn his head. He recognized the voice and knew it meant no danger, only a great deal of effort. "Is it too much to ask to simply be left alone for a while?"

Tatiana Michalovna looked at the elderly Arkonide, almost pitifully. "Are you thinking of...home?" When she talked, her voice was normally a little gruff. She only put this gruffness aside when she spoke to Crest alone.

"Yes. I'm thinking of home." He propped himself up on his lower arms and rose slowly. He found it difficult to stand up quickly. I'm no longer as young as I was. "But I'm not only thinking of home."

He was now almost at eye-level with Tatiana. “I’m also thinking about Thora.”

“How stupid of me,” she responded. “I should have realized Thora means a lot to you.”

Crest sighed. “Yes, she does. She means a lot to me. A great deal. And so I ask myself the same questions every day. Is she still alive? Is she well?” He said nothing for a moment. “And I think about what it all means.”

Michalovna tried to feel what he was thinking. She was surprised. She was used to being able to pick up on the feelings of others because of her special powers. But Crest’s mind was protected. She could sense the surface of it, thoughts like a veil of mist that formed only on the edges of his consciousness. She was able to snatch scraps of images from strange worlds, see faces of other Arkonides and beings that she could never have imagined in her worst nightmares, and faces that looked like they belonged to elves or angels. She saw spacecraft flying through space, and countless suns and planets.

But these images were like stickers in an album where the text was missing. The images were out of focus, veiled, and she could not really grasp them. When she tried to delve deeper into Crest’s thoughts, she came across a kind of wall, a protective force of some kind against which her powers could do nothing. Only when Crest was very agitated about something did this shield surrounding his inner self waver for a few moments. In one of those moments, she had managed to take a peek behind it, and since then she knew about Crest’s search for eternal life.

She came to herself again and stopped trying to penetrate his mind. He looked at her silently, his red eyes boring into hers.

“Have you been trying to read my mind again?” he said with a wry smile. He seemed to enjoy the fact that the telepath had very little success with him.

“Actually, I wasn’t,” Michalovna lied. “I was just asking myself what all this means.”

Crest looked surprised. “But this is your world.”

Michalovna laughed. “No, it’s not my world.” She made a wide, sweeping gesture with her arm. “In my world there were no Arkonides, no domes beneath the sea before the Azores, no flights into outer space that ventured beyond our own solar system, no Fantan. My world was less complex than what it has become today.”

Crest smiled wryly again. “Then we have more in common than I assumed. Do you mind if I sit back down?”

“No, of course not.”

The Arkonide settled into his chair again. “Come over beside me, please.” He pointed to a pile of folding chairs leaning against the wall opposite him.

“Am I not disturbing you?”

“Would it make a difference if I said that you are? I obviously don’t have a choice.”

Michalovna went to the wall, took one of the folding chairs, and placed it two meters in front of Crest, giving her a good view of the deactivated transmitter. Then she sat down carefully.

“It can take your weight,” he said encouragingly.

“Thank you.” She crossed her legs and leaned back as comfortably as was possible in the director's chair. “What are we waiting for?” she asked a few seconds later, breaking the silence.

“I would like to know whether I am imagining it or whether it really is there. Do me a favor and be silent with me for a few minutes.”

Michalovna leaned back, relaxed, and waited. They were both immersed in thought—both thinking about their own worlds and how it had been before they had each found out about the existence of the other’s.

Several minutes passed before Michalovna spoke again. “Crest?”

He sighed. “Yes?”

“I would like to tell you something, to say something while we are alone.”

“Speak! I’m not doing anything else except waiting for noises that probably only I can hear.”

“Thank you.” She said nothing for a moment, as if she had to really think about what she wanted to say to Crest and how to say it. “I know it might sound ridiculous, but even before I made contact with Arkonides, my life was different than I had ever expected it to be. I wanted to lead a normal life, a life without special abilities, a life without extraterrestrials, a life without *adventure*. More or less a life like any other, and I thought perhaps I would get married, have children. I always had a good sense of judgment about people, always knew beforehand what they were going to say. That was due to my powers, of course, which I only found out much later.”

She paused for a moment before going on. “Then one day Monterny came. He helped me to control my abilities. But I was suddenly no longer a normal woman. I was a freak. And all at once”—she snapped the thumb and middle finger of her right hand — “everything I had dreamed about was gone. I was not a normal woman anymore. It...wasn’t funny.” She fell silent.

The elderly Arkonide suddenly stood up and went over to her. He bent over her and laid his hand carefully on her lower arm. “Tatiana Michalovna. You are neither a better nor a worse person just because you can read people’s minds. You are still a human—with feelings, with relationships, with ideas, dreams and wishes.” She looked at him, a little embarrassed. He did not take his hand from her arm when he began speaking again. “All that is important is that you do not use these powers to hurt another person. The large boy who threatens people because he is stronger, the good-looking man who looks down on others because he always gets the pretty women—all of them have abilities, but they only use them to their own advantage. Don’t fall into that trap.” He squeezed her arm

briefly and then sat down again slowly. “You humans also have this saying: great power brings with it great responsibility.”

Michalovna swallowed. “Thank you!” She swallowed again. “But what significance does this place have? What kind of place is it? What are we doing here?”

Crest thought about that for a second. “I don’t know. Nobody seems to know that. They inform me all the time of what they have discovered here. They are obviously hoping I will have a revelation that explains everything. As if, just because I am an Arkonide, I know about every base and every station in the Milky Way in which the slightest trace of Arkonide DNA has been left behind.”

“Arkonide DNA?” Michalovna asked.

“Yes, they found deep sleep facilities here. Not all of them had been used, but a few were. They found traces of DNA from several people. The traces of DNA are clearly of Arkonide origin. However...”

“However what?”

“It’s all very confusing to me.” He gesticulated with his hands in front of his face, a gesture of helplessness. “None of it fits together. On the one hand, you have the sheer size of this station, which has obviously never been used in its entirety. And then how old the traces were—I’m confused. These facilities here. The traces of DNA...this is all *old*, like the other left-behind stuff they found in the system.”

“And the recon craft?”

Crest smiled his finest smile. “Aha, I see you have been using your brain. The recon craft comes from the *Aetron*. Much newer, much more modern, but also Arkonide.”

“And the strange woman. Was she also Arkonide?”

Crest drummed his fingers on the metal rod that made up the frame of the chair. “Yes. Based on the description, it must have been Quiniu. She was one of the members of the *Aetron’s* crew.”

“An Arkonide?”

“You’re quite nosy, aren’t you? Yes, she is—or, better said, she is half-Arkonide. In many aspects we Arkonides no longer pay any attention to certain boundaries, like the one you humans still apply when it comes to skin color.”

“We get a visit by two extraterrestrials in ten thousand years,” Michalovna said, thinking out loud, “and both of them are Arkonides. How likely is that?”

Crest sighed. “It’s also something I’ve thought about. I presume they were looking for the same thing...”

“The same thing that you and Thora are looking for, am I right?”

Crest did not answer.

“The Arkonides come to our solar system looking for the same thing,” Michalovna said, fishing for information. “Immortality. What is so special about Earth that it finds itself in the crosshairs of a search like that? Why do we humans know nothing about it, but the Arkonides do? Crest, be honest with me! What is this search all about?”

The elderly Arkonide hesitated. He folded his hands, cleared his throat, then put his hands back on the arms of his chair. “Michalovna, I...”

His mind opened up. For a fraction of a second, it felt to Michalovna as if a huge gate to his mind had flown open, and all the pictures, all his memories lay before her. He was prepared to tell her everything behind them...

And then the door opened.

Allan Mercant entered the room. “Michalovna, Crest!” He made a slight bowing gesture before each of them. Then he turned to the Arkonide. “Crest, we need you. He Jian-Dong is finally ready, and we need your expertise.”

Crest sighed but got up slowly. Once on his feet, he looked over

at Michalovna. “Excuse me for having to leave you so abruptly.”

Mercant looked at both of them. “Miss Michalovna, you can join us if you like.”

Michalovna looked at Crest and then at Mercant. Crest nodded at her almost imperceptibly. She stood up.

“We will continue this conversation later,” she said to him.

“Yes, we will.”

The two of them followed Mercant out of the room.

The room was empty again. And when everyone was gone, it seemed for a moment as if it was humming to drown out the sense of loneliness that pervaded.

6.

The prison camp

Ferrolia

From the very beginning, they knew their chances of success were very slim. The Ferrons had tried to shake off the yoke placed on their shoulders by the Topsdans—in this camp, at least—and had failed.

Lefarg looked at her small flock. Brellon, who was barely more than a child. The Topsidans had taken him prisoner when he had tried to steal food from a Topsidian transporter. Sympathy was not a familiar emotion to the lizards, and they had put him in the adult camp, making him carry out the same workload as the adults. Lefarg asked herself every day how long he would be able to keep going.

Katmos, the slim woman with the terrible wounds in her face, had been hiding her husband at home, nursing the wounds he had sustained in the war. The Topsidans had stormed their house, killed her husband, and taken her prisoner, but she had fought back. And

it was from this act that the wounds on her face originated. She did not speak much about what had happened, only a few words every now and then, after which she fell silent and fought back the tears.

Kallak, the overweight trader. He had tried to supply the underground movement with weapons. It was probably the first time he had ever traded anything in his life, and it wasn't about profit. He had hoped to find corrupt officers among the ranks of the Topsidans who would sell weapons from the army inventory to the Ferron resistance. He should have known that feelings like greed were unknown to the lizards. And now he had to do the same work as everyone else with his rosy fingers, while his belly became smaller and smaller every day.

Lefarg knew they didn't have a chance. But what else could they do? Were they to watch as more and more prisoners collapsed and died every day, simply to be removed by the invaders at the end of a shift? No burning ceremony, no singing—the dead just *gone*, disappeared.

We don't deserve this, Lefarg thought. She had to defend herself, to show everyone that it was possible. But she knew what everyone else knew—there was no chance of escaping from Ferrolia. The moon was dead, as dead as only a moon can be. It made things all the worse that they could see Ferrol in the sky. Their beautiful home planet, whose coastlines they could recognize when they were not hidden by clouds of smoke. Ferrol, whose cities lit up at night. Not anymore, as the enemy had apparently imposed a curfew over all of Ferrol. The only thing that still shimmered slightly in the night sky above the moon was the Thorta.

Byton, Ferrol's second moon, was seldom visible. The lighting below the energy shield meant that Ferrol's small companion could not always be seen. *A crater in the middle of nowhere*, Lefarg thought. *How our ancestors dreamed thousands of years ago of reaching Ferrolia. And I would be so happy to leave it again.*

She kept realizing that she was no longer a young woman. Her hands hurt, not only from the work in the camp, but from the hours she spent holding tightly to the grip of her pistol. She had tried to let go but was always stopped by the thought that she might not be

holding it when a Topsidan attacked her with the intention to kill. *As long as I keep hold of the weapon, I'll be safe.*

The others looked up to her. She had taken over the lead when word spread through the camp of the prisoners' uprising. People had whispered the news while in line for food or passed it on to one another quietly while working. *Prisoners' uprising*—it sounded like freedom, sounded as if the Ferrons had a chance against the Topsidans.

But they didn't.

She looked at the main yard. At the place where morning roll call took place, the Topsidans were now gathering to storm the last location where the insurgents were to be found: the production hall where the Ferrons put together small components for the invading fleet day after day. *The only reason they've not set us on fire yet is because they don't want to lose their production site.*

"Lefarg, I don't want to die!"

It was Brellon, a child forced to fight in a war that he didn't choose and didn't want.

They tried to calm him down. "Brellon, we will fight. Some of us will certainly die, but we will all try to protect you. Do you know, Brellon..." She stroked his black hair with her free hand. "I'm already old, I've seen a great many things, saw my children grow up and watched my husband die. I'll make sure the shots hit me and not you."

Brellon did not seem particularly convinced of her promise, but he wrinkled his nose to stop the flow of tears. "Lefarg, don't leave me alone. All of you, don't leave me alone!"

Lefarg looked over at Katmos and Kallak. It was the chubby trader who finally spoke. "Brellon, no matter what happens, we will be with you to the end."

"Promise?" The young boy looked at the trader, his eyes open wide.

The small, stocky Ferron man stood up straight. “Brellon, I promise to stay with you as long as the sun shines, the light glows, and as long as you do not release me from my promise.”

The boy swallowed. “Thank you!”

Lefarg looked over at Kallak. *As if he has a choice in the matter*, she thought to herself. *But that was brave of him.*

“They’re coming!” Katmos pointed outside. The rows of soldiers fanned out and came closer to the factory building. “They’re coming!”

“Okay, let’s go!” Lefarg held the grip even tighter in her hand. The cold metal gave her the same promise again and again. *You can get revenge! You can get revenge! You can get revenge!* She stood up and aimed out the window at a random Topsidan soldier.

“The last pockets of resistance have fallen. Why do these Ferrons believe for one second we would spare them?” Kermos-Delk let his eyes wander over the camp. The fires had gone out. The repair work would begin when the rebels had been punished and peace had returned to the camp.

“And then?” Trker-Hon stepped up next to the camp commander. He was also gazing across the camp. What he saw was not pockets of resistance or facilities that could be saved, but a crater on a small moon of a distant planet they had covered with a protective shield to be able to maintain some atmosphere. The only thing he liked about it was the lower gravity. He often thought, *It makes the burden of all the years easier to bear*.

“Once the camp has been repaired, the prisoners will be killed.”

This statement left Trker-Hon speechless for a few seconds. “Why?”

Kermos-Delk turned towards him. From that angle, his scar could be seen, which began on his neck and disappeared beneath his collar. Trker-Hon had never found out in what war, in what battle the camp commander had sustained that wound. But Kermos-Delk

rejected the idea of having his neck repaired by plastic surgery. He wore the scar like a medal—and what made it even stranger was that he never wore his actual medals on his uniform.

"The Ferrons are superfluous."

Trker-Hon knew that the words were not meant maliciously. They merely reflected what Kermos-Delk had made the foundation of his way of thinking: efficiency in order to win every conflict. Severity, in order to crush weakness. Swift decision-making because he who pauses to think loses.

"How can living beings ever be *superfluous*?"

"Look at that!" Kermos-Delk pointed towards the camp. "The Ferrons have risen up against us. Every Ferron out there could still be alive if they had not tried to attack the winners of this war. Down there on Ferrol, everywhere in this system, there are Topsidan soldiers who we struggle to get supplies to. We are not able to supply all of our troops adequately. And why?" He answered the question himself. "Because the Ferrons are cutting off our supply routes, attacking our transports, and stealing our food."

"Maybe they are hungry?" the older Topsidan asked.

"So what? The victors must eat first. And *we* are the victors of this battle."

What about the Social Directive? Trker-Hon thought. *This warmonger is blind to the words of the Directive.* "But the battle is over," he argued.

"For us, yes. But not for the Ferrons. They have shown that they will never be peaceful. If even one spark of hope is left alive among them that they can win against us, they will grab the next best weapon they can find and fight. No, they are incapable of learning. We can never let them be free, and the price we have to pay to keep them imprisoned is too high. Look..."—he pointed towards the camp—"...none of this would have been built if we didn't have Ferron prisoners, and it would not have been destroyed if it were not for the Ferron prisoners."

Trker-Hon had to strain himself to see the prison camp clearly and sharply from the distance and with only one eye. What he saw reminded him more of a cage full of house pets than a place where sentient beings might live. Despite that, it was better than death. “And what about continuing to keep them prisoner?”

“I would never admit this to anyone other than you, Wise One.” The commander turned towards him. Trker-Hon didn’t like it when he had to look at the scar so close up. It caused an unpleasant sense of unease in him. He had the impression that the scar was not only on the commander’s skin but had dug its way deep into his mind and soul. “It’s all about *resources*. If the Ferrons do not bring us more than they cost, then they are an expenditure; nothing but an expenditure.”

“And what if they could at some point be turned into a source of income?”

“How? We took them prisoner instead of killing them so that they could work for their lives. And what do they do? Start a rebellion whenever they get the chance. No, it doesn’t make sense to invest any more time and effort here. The best thing is to put an end to our mild treatment of the Ferrons. To put an end to the entire thing once and for all. That’s the best solution for everyone involved!”

I very much doubt whether that applies to the Ferron prisoners, Trker-Hon thought to himself.

The commander turned back towards the window. The noise of the fighting had already died down a while ago. The rhythmic sound of people being executed by shooting would soon come, followed by silence. The same silence that had dominated Ferrolia before the Topsidans had built a camp there.

“But killing the prisoners violates the third paragraph of the Social Directive.” Trker-Hon attempted to beat the commander by quoting the rules that applied to their way of life.

“I know exactly what that paragraph says,” the commander replied. “Respect life! Maintain it where you can. Eliminate it where

it is not necessary." He paused briefly before continuing. "Trker-Hon, that is exactly what I have in mind. 'Eliminate it where it is not necessary.' That is exactly what I am going to do."

"But there is another solution!" Trker-Hon considered feverishly how he could convince the commander to rethink his strategy. "The Ferrons all over the system will find out what happened, that we killed prisoners. Nobody will surrender—even in the most hopeless of situations, they will fight until their last breath because they know that we are only taking them prisoner to kill them anyway. *Nobody* will surrender; we will lose far more resources than necessary."

Kermos-Delk continued looking out the window. He didn't say a word.

"Don't you understand me?" Trker-Hon asked. "It will cost Topsidan lives if we kill the prisoners."

Still no reaction.

"Commander? Kermos-Delk?"

"Keep speaking...Wise One."

Trker-Hon did not know whether he had only imagined the pause. However, his position allowed him to say something every now and again, to remind the others of the Social Directive, and to remind them what Topsid stood for at its very core. *Stay calm. I must give Kermos-Delk the opportunity to think about what I am about to propose to him.*

"I was among them. Among the prisoners. If you want to milk a fnark, then you have to keep it in a manner that is proper for its species. If you want to slaughter a snepka, you have to feed it well first. And if you want to make Ferrons work for you, you have to keep them in a manner appropriate for their species."

"What do you mean by that?"

At least he had caught the commander's attention. Trker-Hon pointed towards the camp. "Change the way we force the Ferrons to

live. They are aggressive and fight all the time because we give them too little food and water. If we supply them adequately, they will be less aggressive—towards one another, but also towards us."

"Do you mean the way the fur of a fnetar shines when you feed it properly?" Kermos-Delk almost laughed at the comparison.

"Exactly! The Ferrons organize themselves along tribal lines. So don't put them in mixed groups that don't get on with one another. Instead, put them together—tribe to tribe, and clan to clan. They will automatically become more peaceful because they will want to protect those around them."

Kermos-Delk remained silent. Trker-Hon didn't know whether he was going to allow him to keep talking or whether he was actually weighing up the proposal in his head.

"I have one last suggestion," Trker-Hon continued. "We should darken the energy dome. Make it clouded or make it difficult to see through sharply. Something like opaque glass."

Kermos-Delk looked at him, frowning.

He probably thinks I have lost my mind. He continued speaking before the commander could say anything. "The Ferrons should not be constantly reminded of the fact that their home planet is burning every time they see Ferrol. You can see a great deal down there from up here. Far too much if you ask me."

"You are too soft on them," Kermos-Delk grunted. "They are Ferrons; a people we have conquered."

The Wise One reacted fast. "I'm not finished. Have every twentieth Ferron executed. So that they never forget that we are their masters and that they are the defeated."

"The Supreme Command will never forgive me for this indulgence," Kermos-Delk said hesitatingly.

He's giving in! "The Supreme Command will forgive you. I will report your wise decisions to the Supreme Command myself."

Lefarg could no longer feel the pain in her hands. The Topsidans had defeated her. She had not surrendered but had collapsed after being hit. Brellon had told her that the Topsidans had had to break her fingers to remove the pistol from her hand. She felt nothing.

The young boy also told her how Katmos had died: without a word. Katmos had kept shooting for as long as she was able to stand. She had fought without saying a word, and she had died without uttering a sound. *Hopefully she has now been reunited with her husband,* the old woman thought.

Whether Kallak would survive the night was not yet clear. His face was full of burns. The blue skin was now red almost everywhere as blisters formed. And whether he would ever see again out of his right eye also remained unknown. They would find out after he had survived the night. *If he survives it,* she thought.

Not many had made it through the insurrection. But miraculously, not all of them had been shot immediately either. The "why" behind this decision was the number-one topic of discussion in the camp. *Why are we still alive?*

A troop of lizard people entered the room. The Ferrons immediately fell silent. The Topsidan leader started speaking loudly so that his words could be understood.

"The injured will be given the help and the time they need to return to health."

A quiet murmur passed through the room. Three Topsidans immediately lowered their guns so that they were now aiming at the height of most of the Ferrons' heads. The murmuring stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

"You have killed. This uprising will not go unpunished. Every twentieth among you will be shot in six hours. To prepare for this, you will immediately be put together according to your tribe. The oldest or the leader in each tribe must name those who are to be shot by us. The rest will resume their work an hour later, as long as they are fit to work. The others will be assigned to working groups as soon as they have recovered."

Lefarg took a deep breath. *Every twentieth. For the Topsidans, that was equivalent to a mass amnesty.* She could barely hear what was being said as tribe after tribe was called up and led to their own living quarters.

Kermos-Delk had insisted that Trker-Hon be present to watch the spectacle of the executions. The Sage took his place next to the commander. Ferron tribe after Ferron tribe was read out the numbers that corresponded to a twentieth of each group. The Ferrons did not cry. Each one of them who had been chosen by their tribe stepped forward, proud and prepared. And they died proud.

Otherwise they would all have died, Trker-Hon said to himself, trying to justify what he had done. *Every twentieth—that means that nineteen others remain alive. I could not rescue all of them…I couldn't.*

He knew that Kermos-Delk looked at him inquisitively every now and again. He had to keep his composure, no matter how difficult it was.

The time passed so slowly that it was like torture. Again and again he found himself looking for the pale Ferron woman who had spoken to him on Ferrol. But he did not recognize her among those who had been sent to die.

Had she already died during the uprising? Was she still alive, perhaps lying injured in the field hospital? He didn't know. It was, of course, out of the question to ask Kermos-Delk about her. How he would have liked to take her and her companions with him. *Another missed opportunity.*

A Topsidan soldier saluted him. He shook himself out of his thoughts. "Your ship is waiting!"

Keeping his emotions under control, he said his farewell to Kermos-Delk. The latter had barely turned away as Trker-Hon reached for his pocket, then for the eyepatch covering his left eye, and his pocket again. He slapped the ground rhythmically with his tail three times, took a step to the right, and then he was ready to

leave. Only then did the soldier who was assigned to carry his things to the troop transporter follow him. Finally, he was able to get off this damned moon.

Kallak held the boy in her arms.

“I should have died,” he managed to squeeze out between sobs. “I should have died!”

“Or I,” the trader said. Every word hurt, the corners of his mouth burnt with the bandage pressing down on his injured skin. But how could he complain about pain when Lefarg had simply stood up as the twentieth from their tribe was to be named.

“Take me,” she had said, “and spare those two who fought with me, who suffered with me. If we are to win this war, we need children who can still dream, as well as skilful traders. We have enough women who can weep and fight.”

She stood up and walked to the front. *She didn’t turn around once*, Kallak thought.

“We both should have died,” Kallak said, “but neither of us did. The Light sometimes moves in mysterious ways. We are alive. And as long as we are alive, there is hope.”

7.

Among strangers

The underwater dome,

August 3, 2036

Cold electric light came from two rows of ceiling lamps, illuminating every last corner of the almost thirty-meter-long room. It was unfortunately not very flattering for the room to have what was usually concealed in darkness so clearly visible for everyone to see. There were high shelves on both sides of the corridor. The two top shelves on each unit could only be reached by climbing a ladder. They were attached to the walls with dowels so that people could climb on them without fearing they would fall over.

There were exactly twelve shelving units on each side of the corridor. Some of them had been filled from both sides, so it wasn't always clear how long an object was before pulling it out. It wasn't enough to just walk around a shelving unit to inspect the object from the rear. Often, there was a completely different box in the way, so you had to actually pull out an object to know how deep it really was. Other shelving units held objects that completely filled the width or depth of the shelf. In these cases, it was easier to guess the dimensions, but how much an object weighed still remained a surprise. That information only became apparent once you started pulling the object out.

Julian and Timothy were in the process of pulling a large box out of the third shelf from the bottom.

"The thing is much heavier than it looks." Timothy was wearing only a t-shirt on top, and it was already covered in a crazy-looking mixture of dirty stains and sweat, making it seem like it had been created as part of a Rorschach test that was supposed to represent heavy work.

"I believe this is some kind of competition to see who can pack

the heaviest load into the smallest box." Julian was breathing heavily, and his t-shirt was sticking to his body. He had torn the right sleeve trying to save an object that looked like it was going to fall off the shelf. To stabilize it, he had thrown himself against it as hard as he could until the other two could come to his aid. In the process, the sharp edge of the box had ripped his t-shirt leaving behind a red line on his skin.

Mildred looked at the two young men pulling at the box. "Need any help?"

Julian held onto one of the vertical struts while he held the box in place using his bodyweight. He was able to turn around a little in her direction. "Mildred, it's your turn to note things down, our turn to do the hard work. In the next hour, Timothy is *allowed* to write, then me."

Mildred's shirt stuck to her body. Julian once again noticed how good she looked. Despite the dirt and the dust that had settled in her hair, she was a highly attractive woman. The dust made it look like she had gray streaks in her hair.

Julian became immersed in thought. *Will we still love one another when her hair is really gray? Do we have a shared future together?*

"Careful!" Timothy warned sharply. Julian turned around again and used his free hand to stabilize the box, which had tilted backwards at a precarious angle while he had been daydreaming. "You should be helping me instead of hanging off the shelf like King Kong looking at the woman."

Timothy's voice had a tone of annoyance.

"Julian bundolo!" Julian answered with a grunt.

"No Tarzan jokes, please!" Mildred called out. Timothy laughed quietly. Mildred turned towards him, adding, "And no King-Kong jokes either, while we're at it. This is not a holo trivia quiz!"

"Oh, crap! Professor Zarkov was at least allowed to dig up radium!" Julian was quite annoyed.

“Come on, just this one box and then we’ll take a break,” Mildred called up from the ground.

The two men were only too happy to follow her instructions. Together they lifted the box from the shelf and heaved it to the ground.

“Okay, high bay 3, shelving unit C, right-hand side. Box.” Julian looked down at the box critically while Mildred entered the data into the palmtop.

“Contents?” Mildred asked. She did not look up from the display but continued to concentrate on entering the information.

“Just a moment.” Timothy examined the locks on the box to see if he could figure out how to open it.

“Useless thing,” Julian commented, “just like in high bays 1 and 2, shelving units A to H, any side.”

“But we might find something important here, right?” Timothy said, looking at his friends questioningly.

“Hm! So far all we have is coral, Arkonide technology, coins, Arkonide technology, a trident, Arkonide technology...” Timothy began.

“...dust, Arkonide technology, dirt, Arkonide technology, sweat, and Arkonide technology,” Julian said, completing his list. “We’re not allowed to explore the Arkonide technology, never mind activate it. And all we do is scan the coins and the coral and put it all away again. But we’re allowed to keep the dust, the dirt, and the sweat.”

“Breaktime!” Mildred ordered. “It’s my turn to go get drinks. Ten minutes, okay?”

The two men nodded and sat down on the floor with their backs against the shelves. Mildred returned a few minutes later with three mugs made of a strange kind of plastic.

“The machine spat these out containing something that could be

coffee."

"Arkonide technology?" Julian asked, sniffing the contents of his mug. "It could also be Lafang tea from Mongo!"

"Or a freshly squeezed oertel from Mos Eisley!" Timothy also smelled the content of his mug, curious.

"It's actually coffee from the machine that once belonged to the Russian Black Sea Fleet—no, don't ask me how the machine ended up here." She looked at the surprised faces of her friends. "Well, my Russian isn't particularly good, but Cyrillic isn't *that* difficult to read. The word said *boil*, which gave me some hope." Fearlessly, she brought the cup to her lips and drank. "Coffee!" she announced triumphantly.

"So, it's not freshly squeezed oertel or Lafang tea—such a shame!"

Julian and Timothy each took a large sip. All three of them drank silently.

"If I can just give a brief outline of our situation," Julian finally said, "we came here intending to fly with a spaceship to Titan. We ended up at an underwater base doing inventory work for the military."

"Hey!" Timothy interrupted, before commenting sarcastically, "That's quite an achievement—ending up about as far away from outer space as possible. In fact, we should have drilled our way to the center of the Earth to get even farther away from the stars!"

"Pelludicar or the road to the Snaefellsjökull," Julian commented. "Anything would have been better than this." He waved his arm, gesturing at the storage space.

"And give them some work so they don't get any stupid ideas," Mildred said, quoting Mercant in quite a good imitation of his voice.

"I don't know how you two are feeling, but I didn't come here to work as a bookkeeper." Julian looked right at his two companions.

Timothy was holding the cup in his hands, not saying a word. Mildred had put hers down on the floor and pulled up her knees, folding her hands across them.

"Continue!" she told him.

"Timothy, you always wanted to get away from the farm that your parents have been running for generations," Julian said. "You wanted to get away from wheat, away from the same annual routines of sowing and harvesting, away from the big farm machinery and the huge fields. Mildred, your future was also planned in detail. You wanted to study Virology with a well-paid scholarship, then graduation, PhD and then spend the rest of your life in a laboratory, closed off from the wind and the weather, from the stars...and I... I wanted to not turn out like my father."

For a moment, he was lost in thought. *William Tifflor, wherever you may be—I hope you know what you're doing!* The memory of his father made him hesitate for a second.

"Don't understand me wrong, I *love* my father. But living surrounded by the law, making pleas in court, speaking with the accused, trying to second-guess the jurors—that was never my thing. My father wanted me to study at Yale. The Tifflor name would have opened all the right doors for me. But...that's not what I wanted. We three—when we heard what Perry Rhodan had started in the Gobi—it tore us away from what we were doing in life, calling on us in a way that we couldn't resist. We always wanted to travel to the stars, and all of a sudden an Arkonide ship on the Moon made that possible. And it was Perry Rhodan who kicked open the door to the future."

Julian was talking himself into an increasingly excited state of mind, and the other two were hanging on his every word.

"We want to work on building a new world, to do something for humanity that really matters. And now here we are sitting at the bottom of the sea playing at being warehouse workers. Hey, I could have counted boxes and written down stupid lists at home. This was never our thing, was it?"

He looked at his two friends questioningly. Timothy was playing with the coffee mug, turning it with his fingers. His gaze was lost in the swirling movement on the surface of the dark liquid. Mildred kept changing the position of her fingers, interlocking them, loosening them, interlocking them again, but she did not change the way she was sitting. They were all silent for a few seconds.

It was Mildred who spoke first. “You’re completely right. I was sick of living my life the way other people told me to. And here I am doing it again. What do you suggest, Julian?”

Julian took a deep breath. “We’re sure that we can fly the Arkonide recon craft. We’re also certain there’s something *out there* that’s important for humanity. And what humanity needs now is what Perry Rhodan has bundles of—initiative. I say, let’s get a hold of the recon craft and take a look at what’s happening on Titan ourselves.” He looked at the other two. Then he stretched his right hand forward with the palm facing downwards. “One for all!”

Mildred laid her warm hand on his and lovingly squeezed his fingers. Timothy hesitated for a moment, and then he laid his hand on theirs. All three of them spoke the second half of the famous saying

“And all for one!”

They finished their shift as usual, having agreed it was imperative that nobody become suspicious. And there was nothing that would raise more suspicion than three young people suddenly ceasing to work at unpacking and listing the contents of dusty old boxes—as surprising and unique as their contents often were.

The remaining three hours of their shift flew by. They repeatedly reassured one another that nobody would ever think of listening in on them as they worked in the warehouse. And if so—then it was too late now, because they had decided to speak openly about their plan to escape from this nightmare of boredom, as Timothy had so accurately described it.

They had taken three hours to come up with a plan which they

were sure would give them the chance to get on board the recon craft—and then, in a second step, to get *out of there completely*. First, out of the dome, then out of the ocean, and then out of Earth's atmosphere and into space.

When their shift was over, they went to their quarters. They showered and put on other clothes that didn't stink of dust and dirt. Then they packed only the most necessary things they had in their bags. Luckily the crew had given them pods so they could carry out their work efficiently. They also packed their private possessions, like their own data sticks, which they had brought with them.

After just under an hour, their preparations were complete. Mildred wore a sporty bag slung across her shoulder. It contained a few clothes and a portable pod with the analyzed data from the SETI@home project. Julian had his backpack on the ground, filled with a change of clothing and another pod with the orbit data of all known bodies in the solar system. Timothy's job was to pack a third small computer, on which they had each recorded a kind of last will and testament. Julian had made it clear to them beforehand that there was a chance they would not survive their act of theft. The environment they found themselves in basically had the code of conduct and rules of a military institution. And such organizations were not exactly mild in how they dealt with people who wanted to steal an extraterrestrial spaceship.

Each of them had had ten minutes to speak their last words onto the small computer. All three of them were to have the chance to speak alone to say their goodbyes to the people they loved—and perhaps also have a last chance to think about the dangerous path they had decided to embark on.

Mildred had gone first. She had intended to leave a long message for her family in which she assured them that she loved them and knew that they had always wanted only the best for her. In the end, however, she had needed less than the ten minutes available to her. Everything she wanted to say had gushed out in only a few minutes. She told her parents how thankful she was to them for always helping her. That she understood why they were angry when she had failed to take her place at university to study Virology, preferring instead to cycle around the world. She also tried to

explain to them what it was she found so fascinating about Julian—the *lanky boy*, as her mother had once called him after Mildred had mailed a photo of him to her parents. She left the room feeling calm and collected.

Timothy needed the full ten minutes. He not only wanted his parents to hear what he was planning to do, he also wanted them to *understand*. His father, who knew every single species and disease of wheat but didn't know the names of the stars that shone on his fields at night. His mother, who was happy on the farm with her animals and the same routines dictated by the seasons year in, year out. Both of them had hoped that he would take over the farm one day—the house that his grandfather had built, the barn in which his great-uncle had died, the arable land that his father had bought to extend the area they cultivated. The meadow on which his father had first kissed his mother and where he had asked her to marry him a few years later. The automatic combine harvester that had been lovingly maintained by the Harnahans from generation to generation.

Timothy told them of his dreams, of the old science-fiction films and books he had seen and read. He told them about *Skyward*, which had taken hold of him and never let go again. And about the photo of the extraterrestrial called Crest that had gone around the world. About Perry Rhodan and his vision, and why it was better to die for this vision than to spend the rest of your life looking after wheat and never leaving your home turf.

Julian was the last to go. He had initially thought about justifying himself to his parents. Then he realized that such a justification was actually aimed only at his father. His mother, who had always loved and supported him, would not have had a place in such a speech. *Time to grow up,* he thought. Then he began to tell his parents—both parents—what his childhood and his adolescence had been like for him. The great footsteps of his father, the footsteps he was supposed to follow in, had been omnipresent. But his mother had always loved him because he was his own person.

It would have been difficult for him to be a better lawyer than his father. His father was a star lawyer—and any level lower than that was unacceptable for Julian. But *here* he could do something in

his own field, where his father could not match him. He could kick open a door for humanity, a door to outer space. He could be Flash Gordon, and Buck Rogers, and Clifford Russell, and Gully Foyle. But what was more important was that he could be Julian Tifflor. Not Tifflor junior, not the son of William Tifflor. Just Julian Tifflor.

In the ten minutes during which he spoke, Julian Tifflor grew up.

When they had finished recording, they left a copy of the three messages in Julian's cabin before setting off to the underwater dome's hangar to steal a spaceship.

They wanted to begin by acting as if they were wandering aimlessly through the deepsea dome just for the hell of it. They had obtained a key code that was supposed to open all authorized doors. However, they hadn't even walked five steps before they suddenly had a companion at their side.

Julian took on the job of involving him in a conversation. "Hello. Your job is no doubt to make sure we don't do anything stupid, am I right?" The soldier obviously saw no reason to answer this question. Julian tried again. "I assume that, like everyone else down here, we are allowed to do what we want in our free time, right?" Still no reaction. "I understand," Julian then said. "As long as you don't stop us, we will assume that we are not to be treated like prisoners, but are permitted to exercise our freedom within certain limits." To stress this, he showed the soldier the key code they had been given. *There are advantages to having a lawyer as a father,* Julian thought. "Because we're not being kept prisoner here. We are free Terrans, even if we still have our American passports. And as such, we will now take a look around this place to find out what a person can do down here on their time off—you know what I mean, check out the scene."

Julian looked past the soldier at his two companions. Mildred obviously had difficulty stopping herself from laughing out loud. But Timothy was giving him the thumbs up.

It's best if the guard thinks we're just some bored teenagers looking around the underwater dome.

They strolled together through the complex for about half an hour. Under different circumstances, the three of them would have been highly interested in taking a closer look at the facilities in the dome. But their goal was to reach the hangar—and every time they tried to get close to it, they came up against a hatch sooner or later, protected by a guard who told them in no uncertain terms that they were not getting any farther.

Julian had decided to make at least three attempts to approach the hangar in a legal manner. But the stubborn conduct of the guards began to get on his nerves. On their fourth attempt to get close to a hatch that would allow them to gain access to the hangar, he decided it was time to get rid of the guard somehow.

They had planned everything precisely beforehand. Mildred wasn't very happy that they were prepared to use violence. *But someone who steals a spaceship is commiting a crime that comes with a much harder punishment than bodily harm does*, Julian had argued.

Mildred told them that she was not willing to hit the guard herself. And Timothy was far too sensitive to even seriously think about being involved in that part of their plan. So it was left up to Julian.

They moved closer to the fourth hatch. The guard overtook them with two swift steps and blocked their path.

"No access here either, I suppose?" Julian asked for the umpteenth time.The soldier did not react, remaining in position like a stuffed dummy. With a sigh, Julian shrugged his shoulders. "Okay, then I guess not." Mildred and Timothy stopped and acted as if they wanted to head back to the corridor. "Damn!" Julian cursed. Then he went down onto one knee to take a closer look at his shoelace.

The guard threw him a short glance, signalig that he considered Julian to be a total klutz, then he looked over at the other two.

That's my chance, Julian thought. He quietly raised both fists. When he stood up straight, he was almost 20 cm taller than the soldier. He raised his fists to attack, but the guard suddenly turned

around, as if warned by something. Julian took a swipe with his fists, but in the place where the soldier's neck had been, there was now nothing but air. Julian's punch lost momentum, and at the very same moment, the soldier's right hand hit his face with full force. Julian staggered backwards. The soldier didn't take his eyes off him. Julian held his fists up in front of his face, which was now throbbing in pain, in order to fend off any more punches that might come his way. The soldier danced a little before him, his fists held up like a boxer.

Another punch like that and I'll be seeing stars before I even get into the recon craft, Julian thought. Then he saw Mildred out of the corner of his eye, lifting her bag and whack the soldier with all her strength on the back of the head with it. Before anyone could even think about what to do next, the soldier sank to the floor.

Julian leaned his hand against the wall. He could see stars, and he was breathing erratically. "Thank you, Mildred!"

"Don't mention it." She placed her bag back over her shoulder. "How are you feeling?" She looked into his face, worried.

Julian felt for his eye with his hand. When he looked at his hand, there was no blood on it. "That's not important. We have to hurry—before anyone finds *him* here."

Timothy was now bending down over the soldier. Looking like he knew what he was doing, he placed his hand on the soldier's neck and felt for a pulse. "He's fine, but he's going to wake up with a headache." He reached into the soldier's pants pocket. He tried the other side and then triumphantly pulled his military code-key out of that pocket. "Bingo!" He fiddled around on the device and pointed it towards the hatch, which slid to the side after a couple of seconds.

"Excellent!" He casually slipped the device into his pocket.

"Come on." Julian had taken charge again. "Into the hangar."

The hatch led to a kind of gallery from where they could observe the hectic activity in the hangar. They tried to keep to the edge as

much as possible, but it seemed to be normal for there to be people standing around everywhere. Soldiers and scientists were busy either inspecting equipment or unloading supplies for the underwater dome.

"Phase Two." Timothy reached into his pocket and pulled out the mini computer. "Now, let's see..." He tapped away hectically on the small keyboard, while Julian and Mildred kept a lookout. Timothy grabbed his travel bag and pulled out four miniaturized loudspeakers. He handed them to Mildred and Julian. "These two ten meters to the right and to the left, these two as high on the wall as you can attach them."

Mildred disappeared off to the left. Julian used a hopefully unobserved opportunity to attach the two speakers to the wall using adhesive tape he had brought from the toolkit in their accommodations.

Normally you can use it to repair cracks in the wall, Julian thought to himself. *It'll certainly be enough for two stupid speakers.* Mildred rushed past him heading in the other direction to position the fourth speaker.

Timothy continued playing around on the keyboard. Then, with a satisfied look on his face, he pressed the *Enter* button and got up. "We should go back into the corridor and hold our hands over our ears."

They took a few steps backwards and did what he said. A few seconds later a computer voice boomed out of the four speakers. "Attention! Attention! The integrity of the shield is at risk! I repeat, the integrity of the shield is at risk. Emergency Plan Gamma has been activated. I repeat, Emergency Plan Gamma. Please move to the collection chambers three and four and put on the necessary protective clothing. I repeat, Emergency Plan Gamma."

That could have been a little less dramatic, Julian thought. Nevertheless, he was very pleased with what Timothy had conjured up with the little equipment he had at his disposal.

They returned carefully to the gallery. Their plan seemed to be

working. Although there was no Emergency Plan Gamma, they had done some research beforehand to find out where collection chambers three and four were located—two empty storerooms at the other end of the underwater dome, which some military genius had declared to be collection chambers without anyone having ever actually defined *what* was to be collected there.

They looked down again. Soldiers and scientists were looking in panic at the ceiling and walls in search of cracks or water seeping in. The volume on the pod was now lower, but it still repeatedly called out, “Attention! Attention! Emergency Plan Gamma!”

“Soldiers are soldiers,” Julian murmured.

“What do you mean?” Mildred asked him from the side.

“Give them an order,” he said a little louder, “and they obey.”

They carefully climbed down the ladders to the ground. In all the hustle and bustle going on, nobody noticed that there were three people not making their way to the exit, instead moving towards the middle of the room.

They tried deliberately to be as inconspicuous as possible at first. The recon craft was coming closer and closer. The Arkonide spaceship wasn’t very impressive close-up, looking very much like a flounder with a transparent sphere on top. IT had a diameter of perhaps fifteen meters.

“That’s not exactly what I expected a UFO to look like,” Timothy said, less than enthusiastic about what he saw.

“And when I thought about extraterrestrials, I didn’t exactly imagine them to be white-haired old men,” Julian added.

“So, things will stay exactly as agreed—Mildred in the emergency seat, you and I will jump into the pilot and copilot seats.” Julian was only repeating that they had already decided. However, now that they were here, only a few steps away from the spaceship itself, everything felt very different than it had when they were sitting in the storage room discussing their plan to steal the

craft.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?” Somebody had noticed them. All three immediately began sprinting towards the ship.

“Halt or we’ll shoot!”

They wouldn’t risk it with all these people running around, Julian thought. But then they heard a shot. *Hopefully just a warning shot!*

He heard Timothy breathing heavily beside him. Julian jumped through the open half of the sphere and found himself inside the Arkonide craft. Timothy landed clumsily in the seat next to him. “Where’s Mildred?” Julian asked, without turning as he studied the control panel.

“I’m okay,” he heard from behind him.

Julian pressed the lock. The spaceship’s dome closed above their heads.

“Whew!” was all that Mildred could say.

“Hurry up—all hell’s broken out in the hangar!”

Julian did not need any encouragement from Timothy. He didn’t risk looking outside, totally engrossed in the control panel. “Don’t worry, I’ll manage. Most of this is positronic...no problem. But...” He thought things over for a second. “If I was a launch sequence, I would hide myself here.” With those words he pressed a button and placed his right hand on the joystick.

“Next stop: Titan!”

8.

Through the gateway between the worlds

Rofus, somewhere in the mountains

Rhodan almost tripped up as he entered the transmitter arc. *The gravity has changed*, was his first thought. His second thought was, *Unbelievable! It worked!*

Chaktor composed himself faster and hurried immediately to the control panel of the receiver device. Rhodan looked over at Tschubai and Wuriu. Both had survived the transition with no problem at all. Tschubai lifted his thumb to show that they were just fine. Whether Chaktor had ever seen a thumbs-up was doubtful, but he knew what it meant. He pressed two buttons on the control panel. The flickering of the transmitter arc stopped with an audible hissing sound.

Rhodan took a quick look around the room. It was about eight by eight meters in size, and the floor was made of some kind of concrete. The ceiling was about three-meters-fifty above their heads. There was a large door on one side not unlike the one that had led to their starting point on Ferrol. *Military complex* was what immediately came to mind.

Rhodan turned back to Chaktor, who indicated the buttons he had just pressed. “So nobody can follow us!” Then he came towards Rhodan.

Chaktor stretched his arms out to Rhodan. The latter lifted up the injured Ferron man in his arms a little so that Chaktor could push his arms beneath the man’s body. Carrying him together made it easier to lay the unconscious man carefully on the floor. Rhodan laid down his jacket, rolled it up, and placed it below the head of the Ferron.

“So that he’s more comfortable,” he explained. Released from the burden of the planet’s pull, Rhodan jumped into the air three times.

“The gravity feels like it’s about the same as Earth’s.” Then he took a deep breath.

“And the air is breathable,” Wuriu added.

Rhodan laughed. “Yes. Not a very scientific procedure, I know. But the air smells…dry. Like sand, like the desert.”

What was that at the door? Rhodan walked over to it and kneeled down. Then he licked his finger, touched the floor and brought his finger first to his nose and then to his lips.

“Sand! Chaktor, where are we?”

“Rofus. At least, I assume so.”

“Rofus?” Tschubai said, turning towards the Ferron.

“The ninth world in the system. The gravity here is a little lighter than on Ferrol, by about seventy percent.”

Rhodan calculated it briefly in his head. “That matches the way I feel—the gravity here is almost exactly the same as on Earth. And *where* are we on Rofus?”

“I don’t know.”

“But this doesn’t seem to be the same place the Thort came to. What do you think?”

“If it were, there would surely be some kind of military welcome, or guards!”

Tschubai and Wuriu had also taken the chance to have a look around.

“A military building, it looks like to me,” the Sudanese man noted.

“What makes you think that, Ras?” Sengu was obviously not as familiar with this type of special architecture as the others.

“Only the military could erect buildings as boring as this.”

“And the sand?”

“Bad maintenance…”

Rhodan interrupted their chat. “Wuriu, can you make anything out?”

“I’ll just risk a peek.” The Japanese man smiled to himself, then went up and down the room. He stopped in front of every wall and sank into a short phase of concentration. Each time, he shook his head, apparently disappointed, and then looked towards the next wall.

Finally he turned back to his companions. “A brief glance…nothing more. But it looks the same everywhere—a military complex, it would seem. But obviously deserted for some time, as the sand has made its way into many of the rooms. We are at the end of a corridor.” He pointed towards the exit on the other side. “There is desert behind us, and the other sides of this room are surrounded by rooms and a simple corridor. I can’t see anybody in any of the adjacent chambers.”

“If this is a military complex, I would expect guards protecting the entrance to the transmitter, at least.”

“You’re right,” Chaktor said. “But I think we’re on a military site from an almost forgotten era.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“In earlier times, my people split up into many tribes that were at war with one another. Until the Thort came and the Light brought us…” He didn’t finish his sentence.

“The Light?”

“Rhodan, first the Thort and then the Light brought us peace. Before that…we were a people in dispute with one another. We waged war on Ferrol, but also on the other planets that were already populated at that time. Rofus was a place of extremely

fierce fighting. I presume we are in a fort from those times, located somewhere in the mountains."

"Which means..."

"We should start exploring." Tschubai turned to Chaktor. "You're the expert on Ferron landscapes among us. Should we go?" He stretched his hand out to Chaktor.

Their Ferron friend looked at him skeptically.

"Don't be afraid...," Tschubai said. Then he turned to Rhodan and added, "How long do we have for our first exploration?"

Rhodan glanced at his chronometer. "Half an hour, no longer. If you're not back by then, we'll come looking for you, okay?"

Ras gave him the thumbs-up. Then he took Chaktor by the arm and the two of them vanished.

"I'll take a look from the corridor to see whether anyone is approaching." Wuriu didn't wait for Rhodan's approval. He went over to the door and pushed the sand aside with his foot, then opened the door, which made a grating sound as it rubbed over the sand.

The corridor he had mentioned was behind this door. He pulled it towards him a little, and it creaked as it closed behind him. Sengu sat down cross-legged on the floor so that he could easily keep a lookout in all directions.

Rhodan turned his energy towards the injured man. The Ferron's breathing was regular. He placed his hand carefully on the unconscious man's arm. His body temperature seemed to be normal.

The Ferron must have been asleep, because now he opened his eyes.

"Where am I?" he asked, turning to Rhodan.

"Rofus, if I've been informed correctly."

“The second opposition station…okay.”

He tried to sit up but Rhodan pressed him carefully back down onto the floor again. “You’re hurt.”

“The Thort… I have to…”

“The Thort isn’t here. He got away.”

“Good. Could you help me to sit up a little, please?”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea in your state.”

The injured man stared at Rhodan. *These eyes seem much older than his body. Quite…impressive.* Rhodan shook his head to shake off the feeling that someone was trying to get a hold on him. *Keep a cool head.*

The old man’s voice was very impressive. He not only had the air of old age, but also the authority of a person who spoke about things he really understood. “Young man, I am not bleeding, I don’t appear to have any internal injuries…and if you don’t help me, I’ll get up by myself. We have to get a few things done.”

“As you wish.” Rhodan helped the older Ferron to stand up. They went over to the wall on the left together. The man let himself down onto the floor again, with his back supported by the wall this time, using the folded jacket like a cushion. Then he placed his hands on his knees in a meditative gesture.

Rhodan got down on his knees next to him so that they were at eye level with one another. “Who are you?”

“My name is Lossoshér.”

“My name is Perry Rhodan.”

The man looked at him questioningly. “What tribe are you from?”

Rhodan laughed. “I don’t think you know my tribe. But that’s not so important at the moment.” Rhodan indicated the transmitter in

the middle of the room. “What is really important is this machine. What is it?”

“A transmitter.”

“Okay, but we already figured that out ourselves. After all, this machine *transmitted* us from one planet in the Vega system to another. But how does it work?”

“That knowledge is sacred and not meant for the ears of common Ferrons.”

“I am a great many things, Lossoshér. Some of these things are important to me, others are not. But there is one thing I am definitely not, and that is a Ferron.”

The Ferron man looked Rhodan up and down with a skeptical expression on his face. “I thought your skin color had to do with a kind of Albinism.”

“Where I come from, many people look like I do.”

“Where do you come from?”

“From far away.”

“And that means...”

“I don’t come from your solar system.”

If Lossoshér was surprised by this admission, he knew how to cover it up well. “What do you want in our solar system?”

Rhodan hesitated for a second. He looked at the face of the old man sitting beside him. No doubt, this conversation could go on like that for hours without him finding out something that would help him further. But Rhodan felt that he had come far enough and experienced enough to justify his next words.

“We have come to bring you back the Light. How can we do that when you don’t trust me?” *I only hope that I can fulfill that promise!* he thought.

Lossoshérs body stiffened. “Aha, so you want to bring back the Light...” He pondered this for a moment. “I will speak, if we have time for that perhaps. The Thort?”

“...is definitely not here. We are searching the area. Two of my companions are taking a look around right now.”

“Good. And the transmitter?”

“Before you lost consciousness on the other side, on Ferrol, you gave Chaktor instructions on how to set the machine and how to turn it off again. He did that.”

“Chaktor is the name of a Ferron who accompanied you?”

“Not a Ferron, *the* Ferron who accompanied us.”

The elderly Ferron was taken aback for a second. “So, that means there are more of you here?”

“Apart from Chaktor, we are all humans from Earth.”

“First the Topsidans, then you.” He thought things over for a second. “Good. That’s not important now. What’s important is that we have time now. Oh, I hope you have brought some time with you...”

“I don’t have anything particularly important to do,” Rhodan said. *I just have to rescue an entire solar system, somehow get back to my own solar system, bring freedom to my home planet, and before I do all that, I have to bring the Ferrons the Light.* He cleared his throat. “Let me just tell my companion who is keeping watch in the corridor.”

The old man seemed to have recovered well. Rhodan straightened the makeshift cushion behind his back, then he went out into the corridor.

Wuriu Sengu was still sitting outside. At this particular moment, he was staring at the wall. He looked up when he heard Rhodan approach.

“How’s it looking?” Rhodan asked him.

“Hm. Not good.”

“Which means?”

“The room next door is empty. We are in some kind of isolated part of this desert fort. But this peace will not hold forever. I keep seeing Topsidian transporters outside unloading soldiers and equipment. It doesn’t look like they’re just here for an overnight stay.”

“Are they close by?”

“Not at the moment. They’re moving into the better preserved parts of the fort. But I assume they’ll want to secure the perimeter at some point. Then they’ll discover us.”

“Let me know if something important happens. I’ll keep talking to the Ferron technician until then.”

“Good.”

Rhodan made his way back to Lossoshér. *Desert fort,* he thought, *a good name. Only one thing—are we the cowboys or the Indians in this game?*

9.

Lossoshér speaks

Rofus, desert fort

"I want to tell you all what is written in the Book of the Great Battle, in the Book of the Great Light, and in the Book of the Great Joy. I want to tell you what it says in the stories of the heroes and in the songs about the life of the first Thort. I want to share knowledge with you what has been passed on for generations from parents to their children."

Rhodan had taken a seat before Lossoshér. The old man recited the words with closed eyes. His voice was pleasant, resonant, and it reminded Rhodan a little of the voice of the priest as he read the Christmas story in the church when he was a child. Or perhaps even of the recording in which Orson Wells was the speaker in the radio version of *War of the Worlds*, which had been broadcast almost a hundred years ago. There had also been a musical version of it fifty years earlier. What was it called again? Right, *The Chances of Anything Coming From Mars Are a Million to One*.

Nobody had talked about Vega back then. He concentrated once again on the voice of the elderly Ferron.

"It was a dark time. It was a tragic time. It was a bleak time. Ferrons fought against Ferrons, family against family, tribe against tribe. We had achieved so much. We had gained so much. Our ancestors had traveled the surface of Ferrol and created maps of it. They had conquered the air, then space. They had managed to leave their home planet behind them. They landed on Ferrol's moons, but their longing took them farther out into the expanses of outer space. And they took not only their curiosity with them, their scientific capabilities, but also their disputes, their hate, and their envy."

Rhodan looked in fascination at the old man before him. The story he was telling was hundreds, perhaps thousands of years old. If what he was saying was true, then it had been passed down from

generation to generation. *I don't even know the name of my four great-grandfathers by heart,* Rhodan thought. *And this man carries around with him a chain of stories that must cover at least a dozen generations.*

"The time of the swords was long gone. People no longer had to look in the eyes of their enemies to kill them. What was once the bow and arrow became the musket. The musket was replaced by the revolver. After the revolver came the rocket. The press of a button on Rofus, and a city on Ferrol was lost to the sunfire."

Lossoshér opened his eyes and looked straight at Rhodan. "Thank you for your silence! The entire text takes several hours. It is recited to every Ferron school student once a year. In past times, we Guardians went from school to school so that the text did not become lost. For centuries, there have been recordings of the Guardians reciting the text, and these were then performed in schools."

"You don't look to me like a man who wanders from school to school," Rhodan remarked.

"You are right. My job is to pick out the truth from among the myths, and yet to still preserve the myth in its true and complete form."

"A difficult task. There are also many religious communities on our planet that face the same problem."

"We are not a religion. We are—as you rightly said—more like a caste."

Rhodan sat down comfortably in front of the old Ferron. He did not need a wall to lean on, but it was strenuous kneeling before the Ferron for long periods of time. "Another time we can talk about what we have in common and where there are differences. At the moment I am more interested in Ferron history. Please tell me more about the sunfire and about what happened after that."

"Lizards, lizards, lizards, as far as the eye can see." Tschubai

lowered his head again behind the window sill.

“I hope they can’t see you?” Chaktor was worried.

“I’m looking out of a darkened room onto a desert on Rofus. My skin is also dark. There’s no way they could see me from outside. Unless the Topsidans possess some kind of optical abilities we don't know about, then...”

“Then you’re not visible to them. Sorry, you’re right.” The alien looked apologetic.

“I thought you believed we are being helped by something that is guiding us—*the Light*?”

“That is not something to joke about.”

“Chaktor. I come from a planet that is light years away from your planet. My culture has other rules and taboos. Our religions, the ways we see the world, should actually be very different—not to mention our biology. And what do we find beneath the light of Vega? People with blue skin.”

“Strange, we find ourselves more blue-ish than actually blue...”

Tschubai looked at him, confused. Then he saw the corners of Chaktor’s turn upwards into a smile. *A joke! He had actually made a joke!* he thought. *We are much more similar than I could have ever imagined.*

“Chaktor, you wouldn’t believe how many wars on Earth were fought because people with one skin color believed they could dominate, kill off, or exploit people with another skin color.”

“With us, it wasn’t the skin color, but the culture that created boundaries where there should have been none,” Chaktor answered. “The Hetar hate those who do not come from the mountains. The Lorar detest those who do not speak in a way that is as sophisticated and eloquent as they do. The Timkani do not respect those who do not share their opinions concerning clothing and hairstyles. The Sicha literally look down on those who are smaller than them. And the Warani laugh about those who, in their opinion,

are slaves to modern technology and have lost their connection with nature."

Just like on Earth... Tschubai thought. "Then your planet differs less from ours than I thought. People on Earth also look first at what makes them different instead of at what they have in common."

"But they have managed to breach the emptiness between galactic islands by flying to another solar system!"

Tschubai suppressed the urge to cough. *Oh! Escaping in a stolen spaceship from a world that might already be destroyed by an atomic war involving the entire planet caused by the disputes about who owns the Arkonide technology. And we bring the Light...what a strange notion.*

"Chaktor, if I promise you that I will tell you the entire story another time, would you believe me? I don't want to lie to you, so it's better just to say nothing."

"It speaks in your favor," Chaktor remarked, "that you don't just try to say that there are things among the bearers of the Light that I could not understand, and that you therefore cannot tell me about them. You are an honest man. Thank you."

"Nobody has said that to me in a long time..."

"So, your solar system is not peaceful?" the Ferron asked, looking for more information.

Tschubai slid down the wall a little so that he was sitting more comfortably. "Chaktor, I promise you that when we have the peace and quiet to do so, I will talk to you about that. At the moment we have other problems."

"You're right." Chaktor pointed towards the window. "Should we take one more look at our lizard friends before changing locations?"

Tschubai stood up again and looked out of the window at the place before the desert fort where the Topsidans continued to unload military equipment.

"As it turned out, the sunfires were atomic weapons. The memory of this era of our history is the subject of many myths. Many towns back then went up in ashes. Unbelievable scenes took place. Inner cities were reduced to dust and ash, and for generations many of our people were born with deformities."

Rhodan interrupted the Ferron. "You won't believe it, but our planet is also familiar with the sunfire and its terrible after-effects." *But our experiences with it did not take place thousands of years ago,* he said to himself.

"You...understand me." Lossoshér hesitated. "Every deployment of an atomic bomb was answered with another. It was somehow irrelevant who had started it all. What was fatal was that there was nobody to end it. Every attack brought forth thousands of Ferrons screaming for retaliation and revenge. Very few realized that the spiral of destruction could not be stopped as long as we thought the way we did. Then something happened that nobody anticipated. There was no state that suddenly called out to end the madness. It was a Ferron with unimaginable abilities. He gathered a small group of elite soldiers around him, and they traveled repeatedly to crisis regions. They were Ferrons who had committed themselves to fulfilling one dream—a united Ferron nation, free of war, free of mass destruction."

Rhodan held his breath as the Ferron continued.

"Nobody understood how he could manage to turn up in such different parts of our solar system at such short intervals. Yesterday on Ferrol, today on Rofus, tomorrow on Reyan...always accompanied by his loyal troops, who offered support, held speeches, but also turned up in the command centers of the empires and destroyed the machines that were needed to control the atomic weapons. He robbed the states of their will and their capacity to take part in the atomic destruction. He spared no side. There was no faction he showed preference to. Again and again he stressed that he worked for all Ferrons—not just for a fraction of them or for one tribe, or one clique. They called him the All-seeing One, the All-knowing One, the Omnipresent One. He turned up everywhere he was needed but not expected, and then disappeared again once his work was done."

“The transmitter...” Rhodan interjected.

“That was the explanation. The man, who was not to become the Thort until later, had access to the transmitters. Nobody outside of his close circle knew of the existence of this technology.”

“And the Thort’s guards are the descendants of this elite troop?”

“Correct.” Lossoshér looked at the human with new eyes. “You understand a lot of things that normal Ferrons know of, but don’t *understand*.”

“Maybe because I have the perspective of an outsider. Free from prejudices and expectations.”

“Or perhaps because a little of the Light is within you?”

Rhodan looked inward. *Do I have the Light within me? I’ll believe that when humans are as unified as the Ferrons. Am I also someone who people will say of in years to come that I am all-knowing and omnipresent? Those are big footsteps to follow in.* “I don’t think I’m suited to fill that role.”

“We are often the last to believe something like that of ourselves. You have something of the Light within you that people say that the Thort has—and Ke-Lon, too.”

Rhodan pricked up his ears when he heard that name. “Ke-Lon?”

What had the radio message that had led them to this system said again? “Lizards have found us. They will overrun the system! Darkness is driving out the Light! You live longer than the sun, it is said. Hurry! Kerlon.”

“Yes, Ke-Lon. The hero Ke-Lon came from outer space in his fire-spewing ship. Every time a country opposed the Thort and his troops, he came to the rescue and laid waste to those who did not want to understand that the Thort would bring peace. He brought the Light, he helped the Light, he was the Light. And it was he who coronated the first Thort in the middle of the Red Palace.”

“In Thorta? Had the city not been destroyed?”

“Miraculously, it was spared. He who later became the Thort had always explained that Thorta should not belong to any one empire, but to all Ferrons. Its cultural treasures were the heritage of all Ferrons, he said, not of an empire on whose territory it happened to be located. From then on, Ke-Lon made sure that the city was never subject to an atomic attack.”

Rhodan remembered the mosaic in the entrance hall of the Red Palace. “I did not see a picture of the Thort.”

“There are no pictures of him,” Lossoshér said categorically. “But the Ferrons believe to this very day that the Thort sees everything and can appear anywhere he wants.”

“Which means the secret of the transmitter has also been kept?”

Lossoshér leaned on his elbows to change his sitting position. *He no doubt has a few bruises from his accident*, Rhodan thought. *But he would hardly reveal that to me. This old man has an air of those ancient Guardians about him.*

“You are right about the transmitter being a secret. That was the most important task of our caste. It is a secret that makes the Thort strong. But a secret alone is not enough.A symbol was also needed to make sure the Ferrons continued to remain united. A Thort of whom there is no picture is a strong myth, a strong symbol.”

“And if nobody knows what he looks like, it is easier to conceal the fact that he has died and to present a new Thort.”

“It is not exactly as you might think. When a Thort dies, this is followed by a *period of blindness* until the next Thort comes into power.”

“Thort after Thort, all-knowing and all-seeing.”

“All-knowing, all-seeing. Which makes it all the worse that the all-seeing Thort didn’t know that the Topsidans would turn up in the system. And that we have nothing with which we can fight back against them. And no Ke-Lon has come down from the skies with his fire-spewing ship to help us in our hour of need.”

“And when a human turned up...”

“...we immediately believed that the prophecy would be fulfilled a second time. In our hour of need the Light comes.”

Rhodan sighed. “Large footsteps to follow in. Very large footsteps.”

“Any idea exactly where on Rofus we are?”

Chaktor bent down over the desk again. “You’ll be the first to find out as soon as I know.” He opened the locked desk drawer with a *clack*, using a screwdriver for leverage, and then searched through the old and worn-looking documents in the desk. “Aha!” He blew onto the surface of the desk, puffing away some of the sand that had collected there. Then he spread two maps he had found in the drawer out on top of the desk. Tschubai bent over him, curious about what the maps might show.

“Military maps.” Chaktor studied them, deeply focused. “This is a ground plan of the complex.” He put it to one side. “This is a map of the area.” He studied it intensely for a few seconds. “We are here.” Chaktor pointed to some Ferron writing. “This chain of hills here is called the Snake Mountains.” His finger traced a brown line on the map. “An absolute wasteland. Rofus was populated early on. The planet is actually a pleasant world. The gravity here is lower than on Ferrol. It has only two large continents, which are separated by an ocean. But the lower gravity also means that the mountains here are much higher and more rugged than on Ferrol. In the times when we were at war, Rofus was a bitter enemy of Ferrol—but also divided itself. Mighty empires emerged on each of the two continents, and each of them looked upon the other with mistrust. Back then they built one military complex after another. The more decentralized the military control centers became, the more difficult it was to prevent a state from retaliating after an atomic attack.”

That sounds very familiar to me, Tschubai thought. “On Earth that is referred to as *mutual assured destruction*.”

“A fitting description. Rofus had only one large city—Tschugnor. But there were many smaller cities, which meant the planet had a pretty large population.” He pointed to some other places on the map, colored circles that symbolized both cities and the size of the population. It was a simple system—the bigger a circle was, the more inhabitants the city had. “We are in the Great Southern Desert. Red sand as far as the eye can see. Water had to be transported here across large distances, sometimes thousands of kilometers. The mountains here are as high as ten thousand meters. If you were looking for a place to build a military station as far away from all populated areas as possible, this would be the place.”

Tschubai studied the map. Chaktor was right—the colored circles were all far away from the desert. And if a military attack was coordinated from here, the cities would be protected from its impacts. *Only the military thinks like that.* “For us, that means we won’t be able to get away from here on foot.”

“Neither on foot, nor with a ground vehicle. We need an aircraft of some sort. But I’m assuming that our Topsidian *friends* won’t be that eager to rent us one.”

“And when I see what materials they are unloading here, I can’t help but get the impression that the lizards are far better acclimatized to the desert than we are.”

“Well, I’m not a biologist. However, I can imagine they feel much more at home on Rofus than on Ferrol or Reyan.”

“Then we should try and figure a way to get out of here as soon as possible.”

“Ras Tschubai, I’m the first to agree with you. But how do you propose we go about doing that?”

“We need to talk to the others about it. Maybe your Ferron friend has some useful information for us.”

Chaktor pulled a face.

“Is he not your friend?” Tschubai remembered the look on

Chaktor's when he was inspecting the clothes worn by the wounded man.

"He is a Ferron. That does not mean he is automatically my friend."

"How do you mean?"

"I want to show you something." Chaktor reached into his breast pocket. He pulled out a small, shining silvery ball on a chain. He stroked the surface of it gently with his finger. A holo appeared immediately. It was about the size of his palm and very sharp. "My family."

Tschubai looked at the image. "*Three* wives, and how many children?"

"It's part of my kin, part of my clan, my family. Whatever. It's them I am fighting for, it's because of them that I am helping you, so that we Ferrons can live in peace again. In everything that I do, I think about being reunited with them in a peaceful world. And I hope—no, I pray, that nothing has happened to them."

"And the other Ferron man?"

"He's one of the Thort's Guardians." The way Chaktor said it didn't exactly sound like that was a good thing. "They are an order, a kind of caste that have sworn to protect the Thort and peace in our system."

"But...that doesn't sound like a bad thing."

"You're right, it doesn't *sound* bad. However, sometimes I wish they would not only think of the whole picture all the time. I wish they would sometimes remember that freedom doesn't bleed—but we do." With those words, Chaktor closed the lid of the small container again. The holo disappeared just as suddenly as it had appeared.

"Is that the only reason you're angry?"

Chaktor looked at Tschubai, surprised. "Am I that easy to read?"

“No. It just seems to me it’s not the only reason you’re upset.”

“Good.” Chaktor took a deep breath. “I was born as the son of a worker in the Sinalon industrial plants. I joined the fleet at an early age because I didn’t want to end up as a worker like my father. I was hard-working, brave, and a good soldier—and I still am. I was given command of my own troop, but it took me years to work my way up to that point. By comparison, the Thort’s Guardians…they’re born with that title. A child of a Guardians of the Thort will never have to work on a conveyor belt or clean solar panels in orbit, or wear the hand-me-downs of his older siblings, or share a room with his brother until he is almost grown up. The Guardians of the Thort are a close fellowship. I don’t deny that they’re good for Ferrol. But I wish they lived more in the modern world. *All Ferrons are equal—only few of them are Guardians of the Thort.* It’s not what I want for us as Ferrons.” He spat all the way into the corner of the room.

“My planet is also not free of such problems.”

“Have you solved them?”

“No.” Tschubai said, shaking his head. “No, we haven’t. But we are trying.”

“So are we…in fact, we have been trying for tens of thousands of years.”

Tschubai didn’t know how to respond to that. “We should tell our companions what we’ve discovered.”

Chaktor shook himself. “You are right. I don’t wish death by lizard on anyone, not even a Guardian of the Thort.”

“What should we do with the two maps?”

Chaktor unrolled them. “This here is a description of the complex. And if I understand correctly, back then some of the storerooms were sealed.”

“How do you know?” Tschubai looked at the map with interest.

Chaktor pointed to some Ferron writing that could be seen

repeatedly at warehouse entrances. “This symbol means that military material was stored here. Even after the civil war ended, people in the military are in the habit of not wasting resources.”

Tschubai sighed. “It’s a mentality that also exists in my world. But you said the civil war was thousands of years ago. Has it not all turned to scrap in the meantime?”

“Well,” Chaktor answers, “I definitely wouldn’t eat their emergency rations. But the equipment is so securely packed, even the sand can’t get in.”

“Let’s take the maps with us.”

“I wasn’t aiming to leave them lying here.” Chaktor smiled at Tschubai. Together they rolled up the maps. Then they made their way back to their companions.

“We are the descendants of the descendants of the troops of the first Thort,” Lossoshér said, continuing where he had left off before. “In the first generations, it was difficult. There were new uprisings over and over again, which had to be overcome. There were repeated ruptures in Ferron society, and these had to be healed. But the image of the Thort brought us together.”

“And nobody ever asked where the Thort or Ke-Lon came from?”

“Rhodan, you must understand, the Thort had always announced that he was not part of a tribe, but a Ferron. That was an important sign for many. And it is also why nobody ever tried to find out where the Thort really came from. For some, no—for many of us—the tribal structures continue to be important. They give us stability, provide for a shared culture, origin, and tradition. But both are necessary—tradition and change, small groups and Ferrons. It’s difficult to explain.”

“And today?” Rhodan asked.

“We have increasingly become an administrative caste. An elite that supports the rule of the Thort. But in many ways we have lost

our connection to ordinary people. At the beginning, the guardians were forced to mix with normal people, but were disguised. We knew what was being said in the houses, on the streets, in the marketplaces. We knew the jargon used by the spaceship pilots, the language of the industrial workers on Pigell, how the fishermen of Reyan spoke, and we were familiar with the sky above Ablon. Today, it is enough for many young Guardians just to check the net every now and again to get all the information they need. They don't seem to understand that their dealings there are only with avatars, with images of Ferrons, but not with real Ferrons."

"Remind me to tell you what that's like on my own planet."

"You also have this problem?"

"We seem to be more similar to you than I could ever have imagined. The Vega system is in many ways a blueish reflection of my home planet."

"Then I will take the opportunity at some point to ask you how we can get our problems under control." Lossoshér smiled at Rhodan.

"When the opportunity arises, please do," Rhodan answered. "And Ke-Lon? What about him?"

"He brought the Light. And he did not come from our solar system."

I think I could answer the question as to where he came from, Rhodan thought to himself. *But I think I'll keep that revelation for a later date.* "What happened to Ke-Lon?"

"I haven't got a clue."

And he probably doesn't have a clue how he managed to send the radio message... "Good. What is the Guardians' responsibility nowadays?"

"The Guardians secure continuity. When a Thort dies, we are the Thort until there is a new Thort. And we know the secrets of the transmitter. We know where they are located and how to operate

them."

Rhodan pointed to the transmitter in the middle of the room. "That means you can get us out of here again at any time—to a place of our choice."

Lossoshér avoided Rhodan's eyes.

"You don't really know, do you?"

"You have to understand...a lot of knowledge has been lost over the millennia. Natural disasters, uprisings, epidemics. Whenever a Guardian died without passing on what he knew, a piece of the puzzle was lost. And whenever a transmitter was destroyed, a part of the network was also lost. And we can operate transmitters but not repair them."

"Who built the transmitters?"

"We don't know," Lossoshér admitted meekly. "We can repair them, but not repair or reproduce them."

"Where did you get them from?"

"Being from outside our solar system brought them. They brought us the Light to illuminate our spirit. They brought an end to the era of the wars and gave us a vision."

"What did these beings look like? What did they call themselves?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows."

"Is that a part of the knowledge that was lost over the millennia?"

"I don't think so. These beings are such a central element of the stories that were passed down that it is likely that all knowledge of them has disappeared completely."

"And what did the beings demand in return for their help?"

“Nothing. We are the chosen ones. The Light must find us because we sought the Light. The Light must come to us because we have earned it.” Lossoshér dropped back into his Orson-Wells tone of voice that Rhodan knew from the beginning of his storytelling. *He is quoting again, not speaking his own thoughts.*

“How many machines are there? Where are they located? Can we travel from here to there?”

Lossoshér went back to his normal voice. “There are several of these machines on every world where Ferrons have been. There are almost certainly a number of transmitters that we have never discovered or that we have forgotten. Maybe there really is—as an old prophecy says—at least one transmitter on every moon and on every planet in the system. In our order, it is my job to find lost transmitters using information passed down over the generations.”

“And were you successful?”

“Yes. By studying the old reports from the days of the civil war, I was able to filter out a number of places where the Thort turned up unexpectedly. I even managed in one case to identify a forgotten transmitter that wa and reintegrate it into the transmitter network.” He had a satisfied smile on his face.

“A biblical researcher...” Rhodan said quietly.

“What?”

“Just an analogy to a group of people in my world.”

“Can you explain that, please?” Lossoshér seemed curious to learn more about the Light and other planets.

“I don’t think it makes much sense...”

Lossoshér looked at him, a question in his eyes. At that moment the door opened, and Sengu entered. “Our external team is on their way back.”

At just the right moment! Rhodan got up. Then he stretched his hand out to Lossoshér. The older man took his hand and allowed

Rhodan to help him up. When they were standing, they rubbed the dust off of their clothes and then stood up straight. *He wants to make a good impression on Chaktor,* Rhodan thought.

A couple of minutes later, Tschubai and Chaktor entered the room.

"Is the half-hour already over?" Rhodan looked at his watch. The talk with Lossoshér had lasted twenty minutes, but the agreed-upon time limit had not yet expired.

"No," Tschubai said casually. "Lizard alert."

10.

Beneath the sea

Earth

August 3, 2036

The submarine's control center was too full and the air was stuffy. The circulating pump was doing its best, but the pervasive smell of sweat was not dissipating. Crest, Michalovna, and Mercant were in the control center along with the two crew members who had to be there to steer the submarine.

The submarine's headlamps were directed at another submarine that slid through the darkness at a maximum distance of a hundred meters ahead. Despite its relative proximity, the outline of the other submarine was very difficult to see. The undersea darkness engulfed everything.

A 3-D image of the surrounding area floated between the two crew members of the *Delling*. The submarines moved through the blueish-black seawater looking like two red beads on a necklace. Their destination lay ahead of them: a large, orange-colored dot that did not change its position.

Crest wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"This is not the ideal place for so many people," Mercant remarked.

"It'll be fine," answered Crest. "I'm used to worse than this."

Says the extraterrestrial who undoubtedly comes from a culture in which perspiration is immediately removed by some kind of modern technology, Mercant thought to himself. Out loud he said, "Thank you for accompanying us, Crest. I need your unique knowledge of Arkonide technology."

Michalovna could not sense any mistrust from Mercant towards

her and her unusual powers. *He really is an exceptionally open-minded person*, she thought. However, she did not get any further than her first tentative attempts. Penetrating Crest's mind, and the flood of images from the elderly Arkonide, had sapped her energy. Too much energy. She would have needed a break in between, but then events had taken over.

Mercant turned to the two crew members sitting before him. "Captain Starkey, how are we doing?"

The man he had addressed turned to look at the three observers. "Mister He has his submarine well under control. He is cautiously approaching position zero."

"Position zero?" Michalovna asked.

"Position zero is the Arkonide wreck on the ocean floor," Mercant explained to her.

Michalovna looked at the display with heightened interest. Remaining an appropriate distance from one another, the two submarines came closer to the orange-colored spot in the water. "Is this not too dangerous? We know absolutely nothing about the wreck."

Mercant sighed. "Miss Michalovna, Crest and I were also of the same opinion. We both believe it is too early to carry out such explorations."

"It is too early to try and examine Arkonide technology with Terran technology," Crest remarked.

The air in the control center suddenly became even stuffier. The tension was clearly visible on the faces of Crest and Mercant. The latter's lower jaw was firmly closed and it looked like he was grinding his teeth.

"It is not...my decision." He looked over at Crest, seeking support, but the elderly Arkonide did not move. "We still depend on all nations and groups cooperating with one another voluntarily. Formally, He Jian-Dong is not under my command. He is an

experienced officer. And he's right about one thing—we must find out what is going on with this Arkonide wreck. The Fantan treat us as if we are children they can just push aside when we want to take their toys off them. An Arkonide ship would give us a level of power that they could not counter."

"I don't understand," Michalovna said. "Did you give him orders or not?"

"No." Mercant sighed. "Mister He sought out a crew of volunteers. They are all aware of the dangers that might be associated with an Arkonide wreck. But in Mister He's opinion, they are only risking their own lives, and he believes the potential success balances out that risk."

"Do you share his opinion?"

"Miss Michalovna, nobody asked for my opinion. Seen from a purely objective standpoint, He Jian-Dong is right, but I personally find it a little premature to risk human life. We know far too little...and there are still not enough people who share our vision. I don't want to lose any of them."

The Chinese soldier's voice suddenly came through the radio. "Starkey, can you hear us?"

"Loud and clear," the captain answered.

"Good. I'm sending over what our cameras are picking up just now. Perhaps Crest can help us analyze the images and give his assessment of the situation."

Starkey pressed two buttons. At the edge of the control center, in the very last corner, a three-dimensional image emerged. The wreck of the Arkonide spaceship slowly became visible in the cone of light coming from the submarine. It was an almost perfect sphere, and was only slightly submerged in the ocean floor. The surface of the sphere was tarnished, but it seemed to be intact.

Michalovna leaned forward. "Are the dimensions correct?" She indicated the lower edge of the display where numbers pertaining

to the size and distance were shown.

Jian-Dong's voice sounded from the radio. "Yes, the numbers are correct."

"Wow!" was all she could say.

Crest now also bent forward, interested in what he saw. He was obviously converting the decimal figures in his head into Arkonide dimensions. Then he looked over at Mercant, who was in turn watching Crest with interest.

"About eight hundred meters in diameter. It's an Arkonide warship. That gives us a means of power that the Fantan in this solar system cannot withstand."

Mercant looked at the images with satisfaction. "Perhaps the old warhorse is right after all..."

"Hey, Mercant," a voice said cheerfully from the microphone, "thanks for your assessment. We're going to get closer to the wreck."

"He Jian-Dong, wait!" Mercant bent down to the microphone. "Do you not want to send out a probe first, before risking your life?"

Friendly laughter poured out of the microphone. "Mercant, it's our lives we are risking, not yours. Maybe the wreck won't even react at all, and then it's irrelevant what we send. Or it might react to a probe differently than to a submarine, and then we won't find out anything. However, if it reacts slowly, the clever thing to do is to dive right in."

Mercant looked over at Crest, an unspoken question in his expression.

"I'm not familiar with the automatic defense mechanisms of spaceships," the elderly Arkonide answered. "Mister He may be right with his assessment of the situation...or he may be wrong."

Mercant thought about it for a second. "Mister He, I cannot stop

you from doing what you want, but please be careful!"

"Thank you! We will be careful. I'll concentrate now on steering this thing. We'll have all the data sent over to you automatically..."

...so that you'll know how to continue if anything happens to us, Mercant thought, ending the sentence silently in his head.

Michalovna, Mercant, and Crest moved forward to get a better view of the display.

"We're holding our position," Starkey announced.

"Good," Mercant said.

The dot on the screen moved closer to the display of the wreck in tiny increments. "Do we have any other images?" Mercant asked.

"He Jian-Dong said it would be unwise to approach the wreck with a submarine and cameras at the same time. We have some pictures, but the best ones are from He's ship."

"Do we have any pictures taken from above?" Mercant asked.

Starkey pressed a few buttons, and an image from a robot camera located some distance away appeared next to the first image.

"Infrared, please."

Starkey obeyed and switched the display mode accordingly. A light blue sphere emerged from the darkness of the gloomy deeper blue surroundings.

"Excellent," Mercant said.

"It's a thermal image, is that right?" Crest asked. Mercant nodded in confirmation. "Good. Then the wreck is not a total wreck. Its temperature is higher than that of the surrounding water, which means the shell is not flooded. The ship is far more intact than one might think at first glance."

“We’ve found something!” He Jian-Dong informed them over the radio. “Crest, can you give us any information about this?”

Another blurred image made the cabin of the submarine even fuller than it already was. Michalovna moved back a little so that Crest could get a better look. The image was blurred by what looked like swirls of disturbed water. Behind that they could see Arkonide letters.

“Can Mister He keep the submarine still for a second to stop the water from swirling?” Mercant asked impatiently.

No confirmation came, but the image grew a little clearer. The plants and debris thrown up by the submarine’s drive still floated through the image, but the writing on the side of the wreck had become much clearer.

“*Tosoma*,” Crest whispered.

“*Tosoma*? That sounds more Japanese than Arkonide. Does the name mean anything to you, Crest?”

“Mister Mercant, I’m sorry to have to disappoint you. The *Tosoma* is not a ship that was commissioned to seek out the race of bravest humanoids in the Milky Way and then park on the ocean floor of its destination planet until an elderly Arkonide found it again. So, negative.”

“Crest, you are developing a sense of humor that makes me a little nervous.” Mercant turned back towards the display. In the meantime, pictures taken by the exterior cameras on He’s submarine were being shown there. In the artificial light, they could see that the shell of the spaceship was intact. The camera examined the outer shell section by section.

“What are they doing there?” Michalovna asked curiously.

“Looking for a hatch,” Starkey informed them. “The shell looks as if it won’t be possible to simply penetrate using our methods. So we’re looking for a possibility to enter the spaceship in the submarine.”

“So we’re now speaking about a spaceship and no longer about a wreck?”

Crest did not correct Michalovna. He was also staring at the images, fascinated. “After such a long time lying dormant on the seabed, humans now turn up to awaken it again. It’s somehow romantic, don’t you think?”

Neither Mercant nor Michalovna knew how to respond to that statement.

A hatch had been detected by the cameras on He’s submarine. It was amazingly free of dirt. If you only saw the hatch, you would never know it belonged to a spaceship lying thousands of meters below the sea. The camera remained in position.

He Jian-Dong’s voice came out of the speaker again. “Crest, is there a special code we have to transmit?”

The elderly Arkonide bent forward. “No. Try to make contact on all frequencies. If the spaceship responds, then, with your permission, I will take over communication.”

“Good,” Jian-Dong answered. A few seconds later, words of greeting could be heard in various languages that he had transmitted on all frequencies to the ship.

“Alien ship! We are friends of the Arkonides. Please open the hatch for our submarine! Can you hear us? If so, please answer on one of the frequencies we are using.”

He Jian-Dong transmitted the words again and again. After a few minutes, the message suddenly stopped.

The soldier came back on the radio, “I don’t believe it makes sense to continue with the message. Crest, we could try to open the hatch manually using the submarine’s manipulators. Is that possible?”

Crest was immediately enthusiastic about this suggestion. “Yes, it is possible to open the hatch manually from outside. But you never know whether you have to have an auxiliary craft or a submarine

pass through the airlock first, although the airlock controls are damaged. How well can the manipulators be steered?"

Whispering could be heard from the other end, then He Jian-Dong said, "My man responsible for that says he could open a bottle with the manipulators, but he couldn't play the violin on them." He laughed. "I presume he is trying to tell us there won't be any problems."

Starkey had turned up the resolution on the cameras as high as possible so that they could see the hatch clearly. Crest peered at the image on the display for a few seconds. "There is an opening at the top right. If the manipulator grips inside it and exerts pressure to the side then a cover plate should open." *And, if we're lucky, the hatch will open and we will be in possession of an Arkonide ship,* Crest thought, *which can bring me back to Arkon…or help me finish my search!*

Nobody from the other submarine confirmed his explanation, but the camera showed a manipulator arm cautiously moving closer to the opening. One of the two grips at the end of it went into the opening, and the cover plate folded back shortly after.

"Good," Crest commented. "There should be a lever. You have to grip it and turn it 180 degrees to the left."

The manipulator arm went back into the opening and gripped the lever. All of a sudden a beeping noise started inside the submarine's control center.

"Alarm!" Starkey pointed to the infrared display. A piece of equipment in the Arkonide spaceship had activated. The heat it gave off was reflected as a yellow light on the infrared image.

"He Jian-Dong, listen to me!," Mercant shouted into the microphone. "The ship is still functional. Get of there! Do you hear me? Get out of there!"

The soldier's voice came out of the speaker again, still completely calm. "But that's exactly what we were hoping for. A machine becomes activated, and then the hatch swings right open

inviting us inside. That's precisely what we wanted to happen..."

Yes, Mercant thought, *we wanted a weapon against the Fantan.* He was suddenly overcome by an unpleasant feeling. He looked back at the infrared image. "Crest, look, the activated machine is not anywhere near the airlock. Is there a central power supply for the airlock?"

Crest took a quick look. "Mercant, you're right. That's not the control for the airlock! Tell your people to abort immediately."

"Mister He, Mercant here. Did you hear what Crest said? Abort immediately! Get as far away from the ship as you can. Starkey," he said, turning to the captain, "we are withdrawing immediately. Don't lose contact with He Jian-Dong, but make sure we maintain a safe distance."

"Aye, aye, sir," he responded.

Crest, Mercant, and Michalovna were watching the display. The yellow spot got bigger and brighter. They had still not heard anything more from He Jian-Dong. Then his voice came on again.

"Mercant, damn it, you were right. We're turning back—"

The radio transmission broke off mid-sentence. Crest saw the yellow spot expanding until it filled the entire screen and became blindingly white. He instinctively held on tight to the backrest of Starkey's seat. At that very same moment, a shock wave rocked the submarine.

"He Jian-Dong? Can you hear me? He Jian-Dong?" Starkey called into the microphone in an agitated voice.

"*Delling*, we have registered an explosion," the underwater dome said over the radio. "Following that, Jian-Dong's ship disappeared from our screens. We must assume the Arkonide ship destroyed the intruder."

11.

In the troop transporter

Between Ferrolia and Rofus

"Injured?" The Topsidan soldier grunted this more than he actually asked it.

"No!" Trker-Hon answered.

The soldier looked at him inquisitively. "A Wise One?"

Trker-Hon sighed. *What is better, injured or wise?* "Yes."

"We are not prepared for your transport." The soldier obviously felt uneasy with the situation.

"I'm used to not traveling under the best circumstances," the Wise One said. "How long will the flight last?"

"Eight or nine hours, if I've been informed correctly."

"But Rofus is the nearest planet to Ferrol?" Trker-Hon was confused.

"Correct. But unfortunately, they are still not very close to one another. Like I said, eight or nine hours."

"Good." Trker-Hon resigned himself to his fate. "The main thing is that I can sit somewhere."

The soldier studied the Wise One from top to bottom. "I'm sure that can be arranged." After a brief pause, he added, "Have a good trip!" before pointing Trker-Hon towards the entry hatch of the troop transporter.

Trker-Hon was met by the stench of rotting flesh and death. *A slaughterhouse.* But he soon had to revise that thought. *It smells like a hospital.*

The interior lighting had been dimmed. There were bunks on the floor on both sides, and the soldiers were hunched together on benches along the outside. He looked around trying to find somewhere to sit. There were about forty Topsidans in the room. *Only soldiers,* he thought, *no medical staff at all.*

Most of them had obvious injuries—a missing arm, a severed tail, a bandaged head, bloody bandages around their chests. Two soldiers had crutches so that they could get in and out of the transporter on their own despite having lost a leg.

Many of them had no visible injuries. One soldier sat on a bench rocking his body back and forth again and again. As he did so, saliva dribbled out of the corners of his mouth. Another was unable to sit still for a second. His right hand twitched the entire time as his head swayed from side to side with hectic movements. His eyes seemed to want to take in the entire room at once. *His body is intact, but his spirit is broken*, the Wise One thought.

Trker-Hon looked around. No more wounded were brought on board after him. He had to find somewhere to sit, as the ship would be launching any minute now.

He finally found an empty seat in the farthest corner of the cabin. None of the others had tried to sit there. He walked towards the seat but stopped in his tracks when he looked at the bunk positioned in front of the set.

By the Social Directive!

The soldier was more dead than alive. His skull must have been caved in by a blunt object. His face was almost completely hidden beneath bandages, with only one eye and his mouth visible.

Trker-Hon's body stiffened. He took the last few steps towards the row of seats and sat down. Then he fastened his safety belt and prepared for launch. He had only just clicked the belt closed when the injured man opened his one eye.

"I see I have suitable company."

Trker-Hon was surprised. “Suitable company?”

“Well,” the injured soldier answered, “at least together we have two eyes.”

The troop transporter launched as gently as possible. Despite that, a number of sighs and groans could be heard throughout the cabin. Many of the wounded had difficulty holding on to the belts around their bodies. The cabin was repeatedly shaken by slight impacts as the troop transporter left the Ferrol moon’s field of gravity.

“What’s your name?” Trker-Hon asked, bending over the injured soldier.

The latter wet his lips with his swollen tongue before answering. “Kolv-Elnhuk. 16th Infantry, ground forces.”

Trker-Hon reached into his shoulder bag and brought out a water bottle. He raised it carefully to the mouth of the young Topsidan. “Drink this! You need fluids.”

The soldier drank greedily. “Thanks!” He closed his eyes, obviously tired. “What are you doing on a flight of the damned like this one?”

I would like to know that too, Trker-Hon thought. “Important work to do on Rofus.”

Kolv-Elnhuk gave him a dry laugh, which immediately turned into a coughing fit. He pulled a face, obviously in pain. “Important work. That’s what they said to us when they ordered us to conquer the Thorta. But what for?”

Trker-Hon did not get a chance to answer that. One of the Topsidans had stopped silently swaying to and fro and was now sitting curled up in his seat. His neighbor tried to talk to him. Then the other suddenly jumped up and began shouting at the air in a sing-song voice.

“I don’t want to die far away from home! I don’t want to die far

away from home! I don't want to die far away from home. I don't want to..." His words turned into an incomprehensible babble, as his neighbor tried to calm him down.

"See?" Kolv-Elnhuk said. "Here we all are. Far from home and devoid of hope."

"But we have won the war, have we not?"

Kolv-Elnhuk gave another dry laugh. "We destroyed their spaceships and bombed their cities. We beat their army and occupied their capital city. But the Ferrons don't give up. No matter what we do, they don't give up. Again and again they gather together, ambush our transports. Then after that, the Ferrons attack us with the weapons they stole from us."

"Is that what happened to you?" Trker-Hon was curious about what had happened to the young Topsidan.

"No." He pointed to the wound on his head with his shaking hand. "This came from a Ferron with a sword. With a *sword!* We are waging this war with modern weapons and spaceships while the Ferrons wage war with everything at their disposal."

Both of them were silent. It was Kolv-Elnhuk who began speaking first. "Do you know what, old man? I don't want to die here. Of course we all have to die, I know that," he said, in response to the usual argument he expected to hear from Trker-Hon. "But why here? What do we want here?"

As if there weren't countless unpopulated systems, the Wise One thought. *Why are we attacking people who are technologically backward? This is not a war; it is nothing more than senseless slaughter...but why?* "I don't know."

"Not even a Wise One knows?"

"I really don't know why."

"Then I will die without even knowing what for."

Trker-Hon looked down at the young Topsidan. "Die?"

“Old man, I am afraid the painkillers will stop working at some point. Then it will be just like before the first dose of painkillers. My head...that’s already clear. But then I’ll scream and scream and scream... I can’t remember it, but the paramedics told me. And I forget so much. Death is sometimes a release.” Exhausted, he closed his eyes.

Trker-Hon took a deep breath. Then he took the hand of the injured man in his. “I will not let you walk this final path alone.”

The young Topsidan looked at him with gratitude in his eyes. He squeezed Trker-Hon’s hand firmly. “Thank you!” He closed his eyes again.

Trker-Hon only let go of Kolv-Elnhuk’s hand after the young Topsidan had already stopped breathing for a while.

12.

In the desert fort

Rofus

Rofus was a desert world. Red sand as far as the eye could see. The Ferron desert fort was ideal for the Topsidans in this system. A military complex from a long-forgotten war, surrounded by a climate zone that was very comfortable for these lizard-like people.

The Topsidans were basically a pragmatic people. If they found facilities they could take over and use for their own purposes, they did. And that's what happened in the Vega system.

Trker-Hon had had enough time to take a look at the complex from the waiting room of the Supreme Command. The large window provided a view of the expansive desert landscape, and he could see the large buildings of the desert fort on the other side. There was a great deal of hectic toing and froing between the buildings. The Topsidans were busy unloading equipment and troops for a longer period of stay in the system.

This complex must have been destroyed and rebuilt many times, as there were piles of rubble everywhere. A single tower rose up above the fortress, almost defiantly. Its uppermost tip had been shot away, and its sides glittered in the sunshine. Trker-Hon could see colored mosaic tiles, and asked himself whether they told a story. He decided to take a closer look at them. Later.

He was the first to be escorted out of the troop transporter. *How could I ever believe I would be brought to the Supreme Commander immediately?* he thought. He had already been sitting here for more than two hours. His thoughts kept returning to the injured in the troop transporter. Kolv-Elnhuk was the only one who had died during the flight, but many of them would not survive the next few days.

Why? Trker-Hon asked himself over and over again.

Finally, the door to the Supreme Commander's anteroom opened.

"Trker-Hon?" the adjutant asked.

"Yes."

Follow me to the Supreme Commander."

He followed the adjutant, who yanked open the door on the other side of the anteroom.

"Trker-Hon, direct from Ferrolia," the adjutant reported.

Trker-Hon stepped into the room. The door closed behind him, and he was alone with Chrekt-Orn. The old Topsidan had fought in many wars. If you could believe the rumors spoken in the corridors of the barracks, then his entire body was covered in scars. *And his soul as well, if I heard correctly,* the Wise One thought to himself.

The office was sparsely furnished. All of the Ferron furniture had obviously been removed. There was a broad desk with a Topsidian chair, which offered space for the Topsidans' tails. On the desk there was a computer terminal, a writing pad, and several office items. Two shelving units stood against the walls, and there were two seats in front of the desk. There were no photos, no maps, nothing that might have given the room a personal touch.

Chrekt-Orn did not get up to greet him. He pointed silently to the chairs in front of his desk. Trker-Hon sat down.

"I heard you had a very strange conversation with Kermos-Delk on Ferrolia."

"I don't know what you mean by strange, but I did talk to him."

"Then tell me what, in your opinion, you talked about."

Trker-Hon had promised the Topsidian commander on Ferrolia that he would use his important position as the Wise One to explain the situation in the prison camp. And so he told Chrekt-Orn what things were like on Ferrolia, how he assessed the morale of the troops, and about the situation in the Vega system. He had taken it

upon himself, he said, to explain things to Kermos-Delk as if shooting every twentieth prisoner had been a solution they had worked out together—in strict adherence to the Social Directive.

When he had finished talking, the Supreme Commander was silent for a moment. “It seems to me that it was more you who moved Kermos-Delk to make a decision that, in its clemency, is fully incomprehensible.”

The word *clemency* sounded like an insult coming from the Supreme Commander.

“On Rofus, you answer directly to me. There are no lower command positions where you can easily convince officers to follow your will. To make sure that we understand one another correctly, Wise One—if I find you interfering with military authority one more time, I will have you removed from the Vega system immediately.”

Trker-Hon remained silent, stunned by the Supreme Commander’s words.

“Do you understand me?” Chrekt-Orn asked.

“Yes.” Trker-Hon said unwillingly, unhappy that he was being forced into the position of an underling. Chrekt-Orn was the center of Topsidian power in the Vega system. “I understand.”

“Good.” Chrekt-Orn pressed a button on his desk. The door opened immediately, and the adjutant entered.

“Bring Trker-Hon to his accommodations. He may move around freely in the rooms of the desert fort. For his own safety, assign somebody to accompany him whenever he leaves his quarters.” Then he bent down over his terminal, clearly signaling that the discussion was over.

Someone to accompany me, the Wise One thought. *Nothing more than a guard.* He followed the adjutant out of the room.

“Follow me.”

Another soldier was waiting outside with Trker-Hon's luggage.

"Where are we going?"

"You have been allocated quarters in the officer's wing."

Under constant observation, Trker-Hon thought, completing the sentence in his head.

After walking along the third corridor, the Wise One lost his bearings. The buildings were too narrow for Topsidans. The Ferrons, who were smaller and physically not as wide as the average Topsidan, had built narrower corridors and smaller rooms than the lizard people would have.

The adjutant opened a door that led outside. A large area stretched out before them, covered in red sand that had been blown there by the wind.

"Why are we not continuing through the building?" Trker-Hon asked.

"Because then we would have to pass through the prison wing."

"I would prefer that to walking any distance through the desert sand."

"But..." The adjutant looked at him helplessly.

"I am accompanied by two Topsidans, the prisoners are unarmed, and I am tired of walking. Tell your commander I forced you." With a weary gesture of the hand, Trker-Hon stepped forward and opened the door, which hopefully led back to the interior of the building.

The two Topsidans did not stop him. A corridor opened before him, and he remained standing to allow the other two to take up positions on either side of him. Only then did he continue walking. The next door opened up into a room with the doors to several arrest cells in it. Food was being brought to the prisoners, and this gave him the opportunity to look into an open cell.

An Arkonide woman!

He turned to the adjutant. “What is she doing here?”

“We took her prisoner.”

“Thank you for that enlightening piece of information,” he said sarcastically. “I would never have guessed that myself. Where was she taken prisoner?”

“I’m not authorized to—”

Trker-Hon interrupted him. “I want to speak to her.”

“That’s impossible!” The adjutant tried to push himself between Trker-Hon and the door to the cell. The guards and the soldiers accompanying her were following their discussion but did not get involved.

“Why is it impossible? She is standing over there, I am standing here, the two of us can talk to one another. Therefore it is possible.”

The adjutant was confused. “That’s not what I meant.”

“But it is what I meant.” The Wise One was beginning to enjoy this little altercation. “Chrekt-Orn only ordered that I must be accompanied wherever I go. Which I am. And he also said that I should not interfere in military matters. That hardly refers to speaking to someone.”

“I don’t know...”

“I, the Wise One Trker-Hon, hereby assume full responsibility for what I say and do.” Without another word of explanation, he walked past the adjutant and into the cell.

“Who are you?” he asked the Arkonide woman, who had so far followed the entire scene without saying a word.

“Thora da Zoltral,” came the reply.

13.

In the prison

Rofus, desert fort

Trker-Hon studied the Arkonide woman without a word. *A beautiful woman*, he said to himself, *if I correctly understand the classifications of the mammals.*

The woman acknowledged his scrutiny but said nothing.

“And who are you?” she finally asked him.

“Excuse me, I briefly forgot what good manners demand of me. My name is Trker-Hon.”

“I unfortunately can’t say that the pleasure is all mine. These surroundings have a somewhat negative effect on my mood.”

The Wise One could contain his curiosity no longer. “Dear Thora da Zoltral, what brings you to the Vega system?”

“Don’t even bother. Dozens before you have already asked that.”

“And I assume they received no answer. However, I am not like the others here. I am a Wise One.”

Thora snorted contemptuously.

Then he spoke to the adjutant. “Do you have contact with the control center? Bring me the holo about her here.”

“Then she can...”

“I do not believe,” Trker-Hon said to the adjutant, “that the recording contains anything about her that she herself does not already know. Am I right?”

The adjutant disappeared down the corridor without uttering a

word, speaking quietly into his communication device once he was outside. Before he came in again, the holo was already lighting up in front of Trker-Hon. Silently, Thora and he watched the recording of her being taken prisoner, as well as the comments.

"Strange," he said, more to himself than to anyone else. "The questions in the interrogation still remain unanswered. You came here with an auxiliary craft—where is your mothership? Why did you attack us? Your ship's wreckage has been analyzed—it is ancient. More than 10,000 years old. Where does it come from?"

"I am not used to being treated in this manner," she objected.

"I can understand that you are angry about that. But I'm sorry, we are in the middle of a war."

"War is something we Arkonides are familiar with. Our empire did not become as big as it is through words and terms of endearment. But we are not at war with you!"

"Ah, the great Arkonide Empire." He turned to the adjutant. "Bring me a chair. This conversation looks like it's going to be longer than I anticipated. And as you are going to be on the move anyway, tell the commander that I am here—and get his permission for the discussion, if that makes you happier."

The adjutant whispered something to the guard and then disappeared. *At worst, it'll buy me some time…and get me expelled from the system.*

He turned his attention towards the Arkonide woman again. "I studied the history of the Great Empire, you know."

"Did you now?" She said, raising one eyebrow.

"You may not believe it, but the Arkonides are an important example for us Topsidans of how to develop a stellar empire. You have greatness, as a people and as an empire. You created a Great Empire, but you neglected your…your innermost selves."

The Arkonide woman stared at him again with a look he could only describe as contemptuous.

“You don’t understand me,” he said.

“How am I supposed to understand you,” she answered back, “when you say only strange things? And apart from that, I am a prisoner talking to someone without knowing whether I should talk to that person, in what may be my last conversation before I get put in front of a firing squad, about the Great Empire. What would you do in my position?”

Trker-Hon considered that briefly. He didn’t know how much time he had left before the adjutant was told by the Supreme Commander that this conversation was certainly not permitted. But something told him there was an important reason for the presence of the Arkonide woman in the Vega system. Maybe it was the same reason that had made the Topsidian leadership decide to undertake this senseless invasion. He must make her talk.

He tried another approach. “The Arkonides have lost their value as a protective power. They lack sensitivity for the Socal Directive. They have no social framework, no moral idea about how to live their lives.”

“You—”

He interrupted her before she could continue. “No, I know them. I studied them. They are hollow. Even the Fictitious Games fool them into believing that they are creative. They merely reproduce. Perhaps that is why you are here with your ancient ship, because your ports, run by the Fictitious World addicts, are no longer able to produce new ships.”

“You know *nothing* about us.” The Arkonide woman sneered at him. “You have no right to keep me prisoner. The revenge of the Regent for this transgression will be terrible. You—”

Trker-Hon interrupted her again, “The Regent? Tell me about him!”

Thora pressed her lips together.

No wonder, Trker-Hon thought, *nobody has ever seen the Regent.*

He is a myth, an Arkonide fairytale. Thora remained silent.

"You know what you are facing?"

She looked straight at him. Her eyes showed no fear. "You will torture me, then kill me, and then get rid of my body."

"*I* will not be among those who torture or kill you."

"Your people will do it. And you are part of your people."

"And you are part of yours," Trker-Hon replied. "But you are right, of course. All that you said will happen if you don't speak."

She laughed at him. "And if I speak? You will still kill me, will you not?"

Of course! Trker-Hon thought. *If the Regent finds out that the Topsidans have imprisoned an aristocratic Arkonide…the revenge will be terrible. The Supreme Commander will have to make her disappear. It is unbelievable that she can remain so calm in the face of such a situation, that she can remain so unshakable. Outside…*

"I have seen your companions. They are alive."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she answered quickly. "I came alone."

Trker-Hon had been observing her carefully. Her words would have convinced him if he had not noticed the glistening shine that flashed in her eyes.

The Arkonide arousal…I can get no better confirmation of my suspicions than that.

"Thank you for the information!" Trker-Hon stood up and left the cell.

When he was outside, he turned to the guard and the adjutant whose job it was to accompany him. "Thanks for your help! And don't worry, I take full responsibility. But it is always important to give the members of other peoples the chance to partake of the

wisdom of the Social Directive."

He turned around and went in the direction of his luggage, leaving the two dumbfounded Topsidans behind him.

14.

Where to?

Rofus, desert fort

Lossoshér was not happy when Chaktor laid out the maps on the transmitter's control panel. But it was much easier for the five of them to study them standing around the control panel than it would have been sitting in a circle on the floor.

Chaktor had explained to Sengu and Rhodan where they were currently situated. Then he turned to the map of the fort.

"The Topsidans are obviously planning to set themselves up here on a long-term basis." Tschubai pointed to the building where they had observed Topsidian activity. "At the moment, they have only occupied the main buildings and the warehouses. But in the coming days, if not hours, they will start checking out this area and its surroundings."

"We need to rest a little before we leave the desert fort." Rhodan did not mention that he was mainly thinking of Lossoshér when he said this. "My suggestion would be that we take a break for the next eight hours and get some shuteye."

"But what about the Topsidans?" Chaktor asked.

"I don't think they'll get as far as this part of the building in the coming hours. If they had been able to detect any signals from the transmitter, they would have been here by now. Apart from that, we'll keep watch the entire time. Ras, Chaktor, Wuriu—if we take over guard duty every two hours, we'll be safe until tomorrow morning. And then, once we're rested, we can think about what to do next."

Lossoshér did not protest about not being assigned to guard duty.

"I'll do the first shift, then I'll wake Ras," Rhodan suggested.

“After that, Chaktor can jump in, and Wuriu can go last. Okay?”

Everyone nodded before spreading out into the corners of the room. Whoever was on guard duty was to take up position in the hallway so that the others could sleep undisturbed, but also so that each of them could move around a little while on guard to keep from falling asleep.

Rhodan had been in the anteroom for less than ten minutes before the noises from the transmitter room told him that the first of his companions was already asleep.

“What?” Rhodan woke up immediately when Sengu shook his shoulder.

“Eight hours. Not a minute more.” The Japanese man smiled at him. “Another beautiful day under the light of Vega.”

It was not a new day, that much was clear to Rhodan. Time on these planets was not the same as on Terra. But at least he felt he had had enough sleep.

Lossoshér was studying the transmitter in the middle of the room. “How long has he been awake?” Rhodan asked Sengu.

“When I began my shift, he was fast asleep. So not longer than two hours, but I can’t tell you exactly.”

Sengu went around to rouse the others. They needed a little longer to wake up. Tschubai took the longest to respond to Sengu shaking him. Finally, he joined them to discuss their plans—a little grumpily at first.

They gathered together again around the transmitter control panel. Rhodan summed up the events of the previous day. “We are trapped in a desert fort. Escaping on foot or in a vehicle is out of the question. The only way out is via the transmitter”—he pointed to the middle of the room, to where the deactivated arc transmitter was standing, “or using some kind of aircraft…better still, a spaceship. Unfortunately, we currently have access to zero such

machines."

"Can't we get this thing going again?" Tschubai asked, turning to look at Lossoshér.

Lossoshér sighed. "These machines are old. Malfunctions and breakdowns happen all the time. The steering is apt to jump randomly to new destinations if you don't watch out. That's why we didn't end up at the same destination as the Thort, although he left only a few minutes before us. As if that wasn't bad enough, the emergency buttons that I explained to Chaktor deactivate the machine in a way we have little control over. I'll see what I can do, but..." His words didn't exactly instill optimism in them.

"Try it," Rhodan encouraged him. "The transmitter would be a relatively low-risk way to escape from here."

"And if we turn up in a poisonous gas atmosphere or in a vacuum?" Sengu asked.

"The transmitter cannot aim for such destinations," Lossoshér explained. "The machines are perhaps old, but when they work, they function perfectly." He stood up with some effort and walked over to the control panel.

"We could hijack a Topsidian spaceship," Chaktor suggested. "We can use it to fly to your home planet and alarm the powerful Terran fleet! With their help, we can smash the Topsidans."

The powerful Terran fleet has only just managed to reach its own moon. Rhodan knew he could never explain this to Chaktor. "No, Chaktor, that's not an option."

"You bring the Light. That's a means of power the Topsidans don't stand a chance against!" It was touching to hear how much conviction was in the Ferron's voice.

Sengu remained as silent as a Buddha while Tschubai stared conspicuously at the floor. It was Rhodan who once again responded to Chaktor's false assessment of the situation.

"Once again, it's not an option. I'm not Ke-Lon, the hero from the

legends, and neither of you Ferrons are the all-knowing, all-seeing, and omnipresent Thort. And I don't know how we, as a group of five, could overcome a Topsidian spaceship, never mind operate it without danger or fly it to Ferrol." Rhodan spoke a little louder so that Lossoshér heard every word. "We are here because we responded to an emergency call for help. We have to follow that call."

"A call for help?" The two Ferrons were suddenly all ears.

"Correct. We are here, because we followed a call for help that we received. I'm sorry. It was not the Light that brought us here. We did not follow a prophecy or a call of destiny. We were informed that this system was under attack. Which is why we are here." ...*and a thousand other reasons*, Rhodan added, but only in his head.

"How and why should we help you respond to a call for help?" Chaktor had also raised his voice. "Our system is being attacked by Topsidans. *We* don't need a call for help to find that out. And *I* have some difficulties believing that the Light sends out messages using radio technology. Why did the all-seeing and all-knowing Thort not know beforehand that the Topsidans were going to attack?"

Towards the end of his little speech, Chaktor's voice was becoming increasingly agitated. He was getting angrier by the second, eaten up by a feeling of helplessness and the painful separation from his family.

"Young Ferron," Lossoshér said, trying to calm him down.

"I'm not your young Ferron!" Chaktor's voice got even louder. He was almost screaming as he turned to the humans. "How do you want to help us? You have nothing you can use to help us. And you don't even know where the call for help you received came from." His voice descended into sobs.

Rhodan took a step towards Chaktor and stretched out his right hand. "I don't know whether we can help you. But we're going to try. I think we first have to find out who it was that sent out that call for help, even if only to get more information that might be

useful to us. And things are not as hopeless as they seem. We have a clue concerning the location of whoever sent the message." He slowly opened his hand. An Arkonidisch memory crystal was in his palm. "This is from a spaceship, the *Good Hope*. The position of the sender is stored in the memory crystal. But I don't have a device that can read the information."

Tschubai smiled at him. "Luckily, we have some information about where Ferron devices might be located. Functioning devices, I would like to add. Chaktor, could we?"

Chaktor swallowed a few times until he had his voice under control again. "Eight hours ago the Topsidans had not yet reached the storeroom where such Ferron equipment might be stored. If we manage to get past the locking mechanism, we will probably find such a device."

"I don't think that's a problem."

Chaktor winked. "I completely forgot about your powers."

"Would you accompany me as a Ferron guide?"

"Of course."

"Then we'll just quickly..." Tschubai looked at Rhodan, a question in his eyes.

"Be careful!"

Tschubai and Chaktor left the room together.

Rhodan turned to Lossoshér. "And please keep trying to get the transmitter going. It's still our best hope of getting out of here."

"But the machine..."

"Lossoshér, I trust in your abilities. Would it help a little if I took a closer look at it?"

Lossoshér looked at him skeptically.

“I don’t think this is the time or the place to keep secrets from one another. You can accept my help, or not. But Sengu has the ability to see inside things, not only through them. Maybe it would help if we knew what it looks like inside the machine without having to open it.”

The elderly Ferron remained silent for a moment, obviously pondering what Rhodan had said. “You are right. It is not the time for more secrets.”

“The Topsidans have spread out quite a bit.” Chaktor and Tschubai were back at their lookout point.

“The lizards don’t seem to sleep.”

“Well, there are a lot of them. It looks as if they’re turning the desert fort into their main base in the system.”

“It certainly doesn’t look like they’re planning to leave the planet any time soon.”

“So where is this mysterious Ferron warehouse?”

Chaktor pointed towards a box-like building in an open area some distance from where they were hiding.

“Hm, are we supposed to manage that in one jump?”

“And where exactly would be the best spot to aim for?”

They both took another look at the plan of the complex.

“What’s that there?” Tschubai pointed to a small, square-shaped room next to the warehouse entrance.

“Looks like a washroom.”

“Not even Ferron soldiers would fill it with boxes, would they?”

“Does that mean you want to jump in there?”

“I can’t think of a better place,” Tschubai said.

With a sigh, Chaktor took his hand, and they disappeared.

Beads of sweat covered Wuriu’s forehead. “This machine is very different from anything I’ve ever seen before.”

“Do you recognize anything?” Rhodan asked.

“I can only penetrate to the outer areas, the first two or three millimeters behind the casing. After that, everything becomes...fantastically complex. It’s as if the machine was trying to protect itself from my powers.”

“Or as if there are forces at work that we don’t understand,” Lossoshér said. “Whoever built this transmitter was much more technically advanced than we are.” He leaned back. “There’s no sense in continuing.”

“We haven’t even really tried.”

“But your friend can’t see inside...”

Rhodan’s voice hardened. “You have operated machines for thousands of years without being able to look inside them. And now you want to give up because you can’t see what it looks like below the casing? I thought you came from a long and honorable line of Guardians of the Thort? I thought you were one of the descendants of the elite troop protecting the Thort that brought peace to the system? I expected more from you.”

Wuriu looked at Rhodan, surprised. Rhodan did not react, hoping he had judged Lossoshér correctly. The Guardian was proud of what had governed his life so far. Proud of what he was and what he stood for. If Lossoshér gave up now, he would be giving up more than their efforts to repair the transmitter.

The Ferron looked into the eyes of the two humans. Then he noticeably straightened. He interlaced the fingers of both hands, cracked his knuckles, and then shook his hands out. “Gentlemen, you are right. Let’s look at what we can do with the transmitter.”

Wuriu smiled furtively at Rhodan, who gave a barely perceptible nod before the two of them began helping the old man.

"In and out again, no problem," Tschubai reported.

"And you're sure nobody saw you?" Rhodan seemed a little skeptical.

"Perry, the Topsidans haven't got a clue that there are humans who can jump through walls. And anyway, they were nowhere near the warehouse. I think they'll need about another half day, if not more, to get to this part of the complex."

"That's something we unfortunately can't be sure of."

"How's Lossoshér coming along?" Tschubai looked across at the elderly Ferron doubtfully.

Lossoshér was bent over the transmitter's control panel. Every now and again he gave Wuriu instructions, after which the Japanese man looked at—and no doubt through—the control panel.

"He's making progress." Rhodan sounded more convinced than he really was.

"Good. I'll take a closer look at the crystal and the reading device." Chaktor stretched his hand towards Rhodan, who gave him the memory crystal.

"Do you think it'll work?"

"If we stay calm while doing this..." Chaktor began playing around with the switches on the Ferron reading device. His anger and frustration were all gone, and now that he had a job to do, he was once again the concentrated Ferron who had achieved a great deal in the fleet because of that particular talent.

"I'll take over guard duty," Tschubai suggested.

"Thanks!" Rhodan said.

“And when Wuriu is finished, send him out to me so I’ve got someone to talk to. Together, we can use our powers to keep an eye on the surrounding area.”

“I’ll tell him to come out once he’s finished with Lossoshér.”

Chaktor and Lossoshér had been working on the Ferron reading device for a while, so Wuriu had gone to join Tschubai outside. Rhodan was listening to the conversation between the two Ferrons, but he didn’t understand much about the finer points of operating their devices.

“I think I’m finished,” Chaktor announced. “We read the data from the memory crystal. And thanks to Lossoshér’s help”—he nodded towards the elderly man—“we managed to track the data to a planet in the Vega system.”

“We agree,” Lossoshér said, “that the radio message came from Lannol.”

“Lannol?” Rhodan asked.

“Excuse me. Planet number sixteen. A cold rock with one moon.”

“Is it possible for life to survive there?” Tschubai asked.

“Ras, this system has forty-two planets. Its sixteenth planet lies outside of the orbit of our Neptune, if I remember correctly. If life is possible there, they are certainly not mammals.”

“I’ve never heard of a Ferron base there,” Chaktor remarked.

“Maybe you haven’t.” Lossoshér’s words surprised the others. “But we know that a transmitter like this one exists on Lannol.”

“The sixteenth planet,” Rhodan mused. “So we really will need a Topsidian spaceship...”

“I have a better idea.” Lossoshér pointed towards the transmitter. “With Sengu’s help, I’ve been able to locate the defect. The machine seems to be intact and is only lacking energy. When it transported

us here, that depleted its energy reserves. If we could supply it with new energy…"

"Then we could make it to Lannol," Rhodan said, completing the Guardian's sentence for him. "And the friendly Topsidans are bringing us just that, am I right?"

"We think we can feed the Topsidian energy"—Lossoshér pointed to a place on the side of the control panel—"into here and get the transmitter up and running again."

"With a few tweaks here and there, it should be possible," Chaktor added.

"Assuming we would be able to get hold of an energy device, how long would you need to replenish the transmitter's energy reserves?" Rhodan asked.

"Hm." The two Ferrons looked at each other. "An hour, two at the most."

"Is that realistic?" Rhodan asked Lossoshér.

"Yes."

"Then all we have to do is steal a Topsidian device, remain undetected for two hours, and activate the transmitter to Lannol, am I correct?"

The two Ferrons nodded.

"Then…" But before he could finish his sentence, Rhodan was interrupted.

"Perry." Wuriu was standing in the doorway. He was as white as a sheet.

"What's wrong? Are the Topsidans nearby?"

"No, Perry. It's something completely different."

"Tell me! What?"

“Thora…”

15.

Beneath the stars

The solar system

August 2, 2036

"Timothy? Mildred? Is everything okay?" Julian was still busy inspecting the control panels. It was silent in the cockpit, eerily so. They could see soldiers and scientists outside. Some of them were still clearing the hangar, while the rest had realized that a spaceship was being hijacked before their eyes.

Mildred shouted from the back, "I'm fine."

Timothy answered from the copilot's seat, "Okay here. A few bruises, but otherwise fine. How's your eye?"

Julian squeezed his eye closed and then opened it again. "It'll be all right."

Timothy had already clipped the microphone to his ear. "Hey, Julian. We're receiving queries."

"Then switch it to speaker!"

They could hear excited voices demanding that they leave the recon craft immediately. Julian's hand was calmly holding the joystick. Carefully, he allowed the craft to lift off the ground a little. The people all around the spaceship jumped back as the ship came to life.

"Commander Emsh here," a voice that was used to giving orders came through the loudspeaker. "Leave the spaceship immediately!"

Julian was calm. He used the joystick to turn the ship so that it approached the airlock slowly, almost at walking pace.

"Julian Tifflor speaking, Commander. We are planning to

embark on a mission to Titan with the recon craft. We would be very grateful if you got out of our way. We therefore request that you open the airlock and turn off the protective shield so that we can complete our mission."

"Tifflor?" The man's voice sounded extremely surprised. "Aren't you the cheeky little brat Mercant allowed on board?"

"I reject the term *brat*, but otherwise that is correct," Julian answered, still completely calm.

"Leave the spaceship immediately, and I will make sure you get a fair trial, as nobody has been harmed so far."

Well, Julian thought, *that will no longer apply when they find the unconscious guard...* "Thank you for your offer, Commander, but I repeat, we are on a mission to Titan, and we would be very happy if you could get out of our way!" The spaceship was now in position before the airlock. Julian leaned over towards Timothy. "Can you open the airlock from here?" he whispered.

Timothy looked at the display. "Only with force," he whispered back. "It's locked with a higher access code than I have at my disposal."

"So use your talents..."

Timothy immediately began to enter data line for line on the keypad.

The Commander's voice could be heard again. "I am assuming that Orsons and Harnahan are on board with you?"

"Correct!" Julian confirmed.

"Miss Orsons, Mister Harnahan, please persuade Mister Tifflor to give up on the idea of doing what he is about to do, which will destroy any chances he may ever have of a career. Please demonstrate your loyalty, and force him, if necessary, to leave the reconnaissance craft."

Julian looked over at Timothy, who smiled a little but did not

say a word. Mildred also remained silent.

“Commander, it looks like my crew are very much in agreement with my *mutiny*,” Julian said into the microphone. “I’m afraid I must repeat my request. We would like to continue our mission to Titan.”

“Tifflor!” The Commander’s voice now sounded extremely agitated. “You will immediately—” Suddenly his voice was gone.

“Timothy, did you…?”

“No, Julian, I didn’t switch him off.” Timothy did not take his eyes off the display. “I don’t know what just happened. But...” He paused for a second. “I have access to the airlock controls!”

“Okay, let’s get out of here!”

Timothy studied the display, and seconds later, the airlock opened. Julian carefully steered the ship into it. Timothy closed the doors behind them and ordered the airlock to flood.

“So that just leaves the shield?” Mildred asked from the back.

“Timothy?” Julian looked over at his copilot, who was still staring at the display. “First the airlock, then the next problem, okay?” He did not wait for an answer, but went back to monitoring the flooding of the airlock.

All of a sudden, there was a crackling on the receiver. An older woman’s voice could be heard. “Hello, Miss Orsons. Hello, Mister Harnahan and Mister Tifflor.”

“Hey, where’s the Commander?”

The voice on the other end laughed. “Commander Emsh is a good commander, but he does not have much of a feeling for...*visions*. Not everyone understands that we must separate ourselves from certain things if we want to conquer space.”

“Mutiny?” Timothy murmured to Julian from the side.

The woman on the other end seemed to have very good hearing. She laughed again. “No, Commander Emsh is standing next to me. He is a little…upset. But he is neither in chains nor under surveillance. Let me just say this—you three have friends in places you could not even imagine.”

Mercant? Adams? Julian thought to himself. “Thank you, but…”

“Enough stuttering, young man,” the voice said. “You have one of Saturn’s moons to explore, so get going before I change my mind!” The connection cut off with a loud crackling sound.

Julian turned to Timothy. “The shield?”

“We’ve been given access to a structural gap to fly through.”

Julian looked to the front. The airlock door was before them, and beyond it the deep sea around the Azores. He looked at the instruments tensely. “Systems?”

“All fine with me!” Timothy answered right away.

“Mildred?”

“I’ve never been more ready in my life.”

Julian took a deep breath. Then he maneuvered the recon craft carefully out of the airlock. *If I knock against the airlock wall now, they’ll never let us have the recon craft for this trip.*

But the ship obediently followed his instructions, and they slowly floated out into the ocean. Julian tipped the ship gently so that the bow was facing up towards the surface of the water.

“Reconnaissance craft to underwater dome. Can I have permission to launch at a twenty-five degree incline north-northeast?”

A man’s voice came over the radio set. “Underwater dome to reconnaissance craft. Launch permission granted. Just one last warning—you will need to come up with something to deal with the Fantan auxiliary craft, which unfortunately do not comply with

our flight instructions."

Julian thought it over for a second. "Could you arrange for a corridor for us so that I can launch right up to the edge of the atmosphere?"

"I beg your pardon?" The man's voice on the other end sounded a little confused.

"He's right," the woman's voice interrupted. "The Fantan don't seem to control our underwater movements in the same way they do our air and space travel. If Tifflor manages to fly through directly to the edge of the atmosphere, the Fantan will have a very short warning time."

Voices could be heard discussing this at the other end of the radio connection, then the man's voice came on again.

"Respect, Tifflor, respect. We did a brief calculation. You'll get your damned corridor, even if a few tourists on their way to the Azores will have to wait a little longer. But make sure you bring us back a souvenir from Titan, or else. Good luck!"

"Thanks!" Julian answered tersely. Then he moved the joystick again, and with a hefty jolt, the recon craft left the ocean floor.

"Watch out!" The ship broke through the water surface with another jolt. The seawater bulged upward before being sucked back down again, causing a large wave and allowing the ship to leave the ocean. Sunlight flooded the cockpit.

"Rangefinders?" Julian said, turning to Timothy. He could feel the beads of sweat forming on his forehead, and he nervously wiped them away with his left hand.

"No airplanes," Mildred answered. "But the Fantan seem a little startled."

"And that means?" Julian asked her.

"If we're lucky, and if we correct our angle slightly, we should be

able to avoid them." Timothy was busy harmonizing the orbital data of the Sol system with the details in the Arkonide computer. "I'll seek the most direct course possible. Every change of direction slows us down, which plays right into their hands."

"Into their tentacles, you mean." Nobody reacted to the joke.

Dark red dots appeared on the display in front of Julian, and they were coming in from the sides of the display, moving towards their position. The recon craft continued to shoot up almost vertically through the atmosphere.

"Timothy?"

"Just a second," he answered, working busily on the computer. "Our position is good. We've maintained our course almost perfectly. I'll just import that corrected data...now." He pressed a button, and adjusted orbits appeared on Julian's display.

Julian began immediately to operate the joystick accordingly. "I only hope you haven't miscalculated..." he murmured.

"If I've miscalculated, then we won't be scraping past the moon, but causing a brand-new crater," Timothy replied, "which they will almost certainly name after you."

"Thank you very much!" Sweat was running down Julian's forehead. His eyes were directed at the display, his fingers either on the joystick or the control panel. The red dots continued drawing closer to the ship, which was still accelerating, from both sides.

"Do we really have to pass so close to the moon?" Timothy asked.

"According to my calculations, that's the only chance we have of escaping the Fantan auxiliary craft." Julian thought it over for a minute. "How long can this thing accelerate for?" he asked.

"Theoretically, ten minutes to light speed. But we can't accelerate fully underwater or in the atmosphere, so what happens in the next few minutes will decide whether we leave the Fantan behind or not."

“And that means what?” Mildred asked.

“We can’t fully escape the Fantan, because this ship can only fly at sublight speed. But we hope the Fantan will lose interest at some point. They can calculate our flight path, and I hope they already had little interest in Titan when they flew into our solar system. So they shouldn’t really care whether humans go there or not.”

Timothy was sitting in the copilot seat, but Julian was operating the controls on his own. It was Timothy’s job to calculate the flight data while Julian followed his instructions, turning the data into flight maneuvers.

“Then let’s wait and see whether you’re both right,” Mildred said simply.

Silence came over the cockpit, only interrupted now and then by Julian’s erratic breathing. He looked at the display, concentrating fully on what he was doing. A Fantan ship got into position to take up the chase. On the right-hand edge of the display, Julian could now see a large object—the Moon. He hoped that Timothy had done his homework, although colliding with the Moon would probably be pain-free.

The Fantan ship drew ever closer. Julian managed to pull everything he could out of the drive, but at some point the Fantan ship was going to catch up, one way or another.

Julian could not believe what happened next. He corrected their course manually, taking them a little closer in the direction of the Moon.

“Julian!” Timothy shouted in a startled voice.

“The Fantan are not giving up, so I have to make sure they think that I might be completely off my head.”

Timothy fell silent again.

The Fantan ship could be seen coming closer from the left, while the moon was coming closer on the tight. Julian trusted the Arkonide technology, and paid close attention to the warnings on

the display. The cratered landscape of the Moon seemed close enough to touch.

At the very last moment, Julian pulled the recon craft around and briefly scraped across the Moon's surface. They could feel the Moon's gravitational pull as it tried to stop its new friend from getting away again too fast. Julian demanded everything of the drive—and he managed to slowly increase the distance between them and Earth's satellite.

"The Fantan?" he asked, without taking his eyes off the controls.

"Braking as hard as they can so as not to collide with the Moon," Timothy announced triumphantly.

"Good."

Now that they were in open space, Julian used all the power the recon craft had at its disposal. He accelerated more and more, heading straight for Titan as the Earth and their lives so far disappeared behind them.

"My very excellent mother just served us noodles," Julian said, more to himself than to anyone else.

"What did you say?" Timothy asked from the copilot's seat.

"I thought you were sleeping?"

Timothy stretched. "Yes, I was asleep, but I always talk in my sleep. Seriously, though, what's with your mother?"

"*My very excellent mother just served us noodles* is a saying to help you remember the planets in the solar system. Mercury and Venus are on the sunny side of Earth's orbit. We've just come from Earth. Mars, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune—the undiscovered territory, the solar system."

"I hope you're not going to change course so we can have a look at the three outer planets?" Timothy asked, a little annoyed.

“No thanks, I want to leave that for later heroes.”

“That is very kind of you,” Mildred said from the back. “Don’t forget, our destination is Titan.”

“I thought you were sleeping as well.”

They could hear Mildred’s suppress a yawn. “I would love to, but the men on board are busy listing the planets of the solar system while young ladies would rather get some beauty sleep…”

“I would have had to wake you anyway,” Julian replied.

“No problem.” A loud yawn from Mildred suggested otherwise. “Where are we?”

“Just look!” Julian pressed a button with a theatrical gesture. A holo of the view outside emerged above their heads, three-dimensional and in the colors as they visually perceived them. “Saturn, the god of agriculture, ring bearer, second-biggest body in the solar system. And in front of it, I present to you!” The view zoomed in a little. Titan was right before their eyes in all its glory.

“Like a billiard ball,” Timothy commented.

“Like a world egg,” Mildred added.

“Correct.” Julian leaned back a little and clasped his hand behind his head and stretched himself. “Let’s take a look at what secrets Titan has in store for us.”

16.

A prisoner in the here and now

Rofus, desert fort

It had taken a full day for Trker-Hon to arrange the necessary meetings. The Supreme Commander could not be persuaded at first that an approach not involving torture was needed to deal with the Arkonide woman. But he'd had to admit that, so far, he had been unable to extract any useful information from Thora. Apart from that, he was also extremely busy with setting up the desert fort. Which is why he finally agreed to let Trker-Hon speak to Thora a second time.

The Wise One thought long and hard about how to approach Thora. Her arrogance, her attitude of superiority, which was typical for the Arkonides, bred from millennia of domination, was something with which the Topsidans were familiar.

But more than anything, Trker-Hon wanted to understand with every fiber of his being what was going on here. Thora and he were figures in a giant game that was being played for considerably higher stakes than the mere conquest of a system inhabited by mammals. And although the Ferrons resembled the Arkonides, Thora did not seem to know anything about this system. Trker-Hon wanted to understand why so much Topsidian and Ferron blood had been shed.

Thora looked up when the door opened. Trker-Hon had managed to convince the Supreme Commander that it was necessary to supply her regularly with food and water in order to make her more willing to speak. And that was also why Thora had been left uninterrupted by the Topsidans for hours.

Trker-Hon studied her curiously as one of the guards brought a chair into the cell for him to sit on. She did not have any visible evidence of torture, so that was a good sign. Her hands were bound with handcuffs.

It had been decided that he would notify the guard if there were any difficulties. He had made sure the guards would not patrol the anteroom—he didn't want the Arkonide woman to hear soldiers patrolling right outside her door. As such, he was totally alone with her.

Thora looked up. "You again?"

She had recognized him. *There are probably not many Topsidans here with an eye patch or who are not in uniform…but that doesn't mean she remembers our last conversation in positive terms*, he warned himself.

"Don't waste your time, Topsidan. You'll get nothing out of me."

He waited until the door had closed again before answering. "You have the wrong impression, I have merely come so that I can talk to you undisturbed. The surveillance equipment is deactivated."

Thora said nothing.

"You don't have to believe me. If you want, you can think this is all a huge fraud, a swindle with the goal of making you talk." He sat down again. Once his elderly body and tail were comfortable, he spoke again. "Do you know, when I was a young lizard my people ruled less than two dozen worlds. My grandfather talked about the huge celebrations that took place when the Topsidans began settling their tenth planet. I'm an old man, but my descendants now have a large empire. And we do not believe this path is at an end yet. There seems to be no end to space, no limits for my people."

Thora interrupted him: "I already said not to waste your time. You can't impress me with such stories!"

Trker-Hon sighed. "I'm afraid I must disappoint you. It was never my intention to impress you. I'll leave that up to the military." He took a short break from speaking, but Thora continued to stare at him without saying a word. "Did you know that people call me the Wise One? And I didn't receive the title for no reason. I was trained to see things from a different perspective. To study a thing and to

think about the other possible ways there might be of looking at it. For me, the world is a die, and most people only see the three sides that happen to be facing them."

He paused again. She said nothing.

"You know, I am aware that the universe has limits. These must exist to curb our thirst for expansion. Maybe there are no limits in outer space, perhaps the range of our spaceships do not determine the boundaries. Look at your people's Great Empire. Your forefathers would have sworn that everything would continue to get bigger and bigger. New worlds, new peoples, new achievements—over and over again. As you can see, I believe we Topsidans are very much like the young Arkonide Empire."

"You know nothing about us Arkonides," Thora da Zoltral said in a cocky tone of voice.

So, her armor does have chinks in it after all, he thought. "I'm of a different opinion. Would your forefathers ever have thought that the Great Empire might one day stagnate, or that it was even in the process of decline? No, let me finish what I have to say!" Thora remained silent, but it seemed like she was having difficulty preventing herself from commenting. "I can repeat it, if you like. Your Empire is in a state of decline. You may find it very hard to admit that, but it is nevertheless true. It would appear that decline and decay are constants in the universe, just as resurgence and expansion are."

I am an old man," he continued. "But the expansion of my people affects every single Topsidan. The life expectancy of Topsidans has tripled within only a few generations. My grandfather was an old man, almost immobile, when he was as old as I am today. One year later, he was dead. I, on the other hand, travel at my age through the galaxy, admiring it and marveling at it. Illnesses or injuries that used to be fatal can now be healed. And yet...in the end, we all die. It is a truth that nobody wants to face. Perhaps that is the reason we are so willing to dedicate our lives to big ideas—because we hope that, by doing so, we will become immortal."

“Your wisdom is banal,” Thora said.

“I know,” Trker-Hon replied. “And yet nevertheless accurate. Maybe the benefit one gets from wisdom is the realization that simple answers to complex questions do exist. Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What does it mean to be born and to die? These are actually simple questions for which we hope to find simple answers.”

“So you travel through space to find simple answers?” Thora asked, laughing at him.

“If you want to put it that way, then yes. True wisdom is always simple and clear.” He now looked Thora directly in the eye. “And true wisdom is recognized. I have studied many foreign cultures over the past decades. And I have noticed one thing in particular. Every one of these cultures has myths about immortality. The details of such myths are often very different, but at their core they are all identical in one aspect—their belief that there is a world of eternal life somewhere here in the Milky Way.”

That’s it, he thought. Thora’s face remained fully under control, like a mask, but her eyes had become moist. Her hands balled up into fists involuntarily despite the handcuffs, and her nails were digging into her palms. “I see you are also familiar with these myths,” Trker-Hon continued. *I was right. There is a reason this system is so important for our Supreme Command.* “Now that we both know what we are talking about, I would like to ask you again what is behind your presence in the Vega system.”

At that moment, noises could be heard coming from the anteroom. Trker-Hon turned towards the door. *Damn*, he thought. *Just as I was beginning to see cracks in her resolve.*

The door burst open with a loud bang. The last thing he heard was Thora’s voice. Then the universe exploded around him in a ball of bright light.

17.

More plans

Rofus, desert fort

"Thora?" Rhodan looked at Sengu, surprised. "Are you sure? She crashed with the *Good Hope*...I thought she was lost."

"There are not many Arkonide women here." Sengu was obviously very certain that it was Thora he had seen. "Apart from that, it's not as if it's easy to mistake Thora for someone else—her attitude, that look she has. I'm absolutely sure that it's her out there."

Rhodan recovered from the surprise quickly. "Where is she?"

"The Topsidans have set up a prison wing. It seems they've taken over the Ferron installations that were already there."

"Prison wing?" Tschubai turned to the two Ferrons.

"Well, it's only natural that a fort from civil war times has installations to lock away the more disagreeable elements."

"Lossoshér, you're right, of course. But what Ras means is that, until now, we thought the Topsidans were using the fort as a purely military complex. And now they're beginning to set up prisons. Which means they plan to stay here for quite a while."

"Then I can jump in there and get her out." Tschubai said, immediately ready to spring into action.

"It's not as simple as that. If Thora disappears, the Topsidans will immediately spread out and start searching for her," Rhodan protested.

"And that's not all," Wuriu added. "I took a look inside where they're aiming to bring Thora. The Topsidans have modified the facilities. There's a protective shield spanning the prison wing. At

least one shield, I would say."

"Thora seems to be a valuable prisoner."

"One thing is sure, I can't just jump in there and get her out."

Rhodan turned to the two Ferrons. "Do we need a test run for the transmitter?"

Lossoshér and Chaktor looked at one another, unsure. "It might be better, but there's also the risk that it could break down again after the first test." It was obvious that Lossoshér was feeling rather uneasy. "They are very old machines. And this transmitter had not been used in a very long time before we came here."

"We still don't have an energy supply," Chaktor reminded them. "All we are doing here is discussing some theoretical ideas about a technology we don't really understand."

Rhodan thought for a second. "We only have a small window of opportunity in terms of time available. If we get hold of a generator for the transmitter, we'll draw the Topsidans' attention. Then the transmitter has to be connected to the energy supply. That takes about two to three hours, am I right?"

The two Ferrons nodded in confirmation—a gesture they had already adopted from the humans.

"That's the time we have to free Thora from the prison. Which will no doubt trigger a large-scale search. Then we have to get Thora here unhurt. And hope, first of all, that the transmitter will work, and secondly, that it can bring us to Lannol."

"And what will we do on Lannol?" Tschubai was one step ahead of the other two in his thinking.

"We'll figure that out when we get there," Rhodan said to the small group. "Lossoshér, is there a way to deactivate the transmitter on Lannol so that the Topsidans can't follow us?"

"All of these machines are almost identical in operation. As we were able to switch it off here, we'll be able to do the same on

Lannol."

"But this time it might be better not to use the emergency switch-off function," Chaktor said, "so that we can get the machine up and running again."

The Guardian smiled. "I'm not planning on having the ceiling fall on my head again this time."

"So!" Rhodan said, looking at his companions one after the other. "Any suggestions for who should take care of the generator?"

"Lossoshér should stay here, because he's the only one who can activate the machine correctly," Chaktor offered. Nobody contradicted him.

"Good. Chaktor, you should be able to find the device we're looking for, right?"

"I've seen enough Topsidian devices to recognize a generator when I see one."

"Okay, so your job is to get hold of that device. And as far as a diversion is concerned...Ras, you said you saw the Topsidans unloading military materials."

"Spaceships full of materials." Tschubai clenched his teeth. "Enough to raze several Ferron cities to the ground."

"This time, their thirst for destruction is to our advantage. We need a distraction, Ras, and something to switch off the generator that runs the protective shield. If you're out there with Chaktor anyway, we need some bombs. And then you'll have to position them at the station's weak points. We'll organize the detonators to go off at the same time. Once the fireworks are in full swing, we'll free Thora, and while we're doing that, Chaktor and Lossoshér will have time to get the transmitter going."

"A dangerous plan," Tschubai remarked. "I'll have to jump a few times, most of them with baggage."

"And I'm not sure whether the Ferron inventory is still intact,"

Chaktor added. “If we’re okay with the idea that maybe only eighty percent of the bombs we find will explode, then we can use the Ferron stuff.”

“And what about the generator for the protective shield?” Wuriu was not quite clear about the order in which everything was to happen.

“Well, we’ll simply have to use more explosives,” Tschubai said, “and hope that neither too much nor too little of it actually detonates.”

Rhodan thought things over for a minute. “You’re right. The Topsidans will almost certainly not be clearing out the Ferron armory any time soon. The stuff stored there is not as important to them as their own weapons. You were already in the storeroom, so you know where you’re aiming for and how far away it is. And, more importantly, you don’t have to worry about the Topsidan guards. Ras, do you think it’s doable?”

“If I take Chaktor with me into the storage room, I can jump a few times without him, just carrying some bombs, while he keeps a lookout. Then we can bring the bombs back here together. That would mean the only really strenuous work for me would be distributing them afterwards. That should be fine.”

“Wuriu, can you scan the area and find a few places where Ras can place the Ferron bombs to the greatest effect ywithout getting into difficult while positioning them?”

“It would be my pleasure,” Wuriu said, smiling to himself.

“Good.” Rhodan turned to the next person. “Chaktor, can you set the detonators?”

“Not much has changed in my culture in the last millennia when it comes to constructing bombs. And I know how to handle weapons.” The Ferron looked a little grim. “The only thing I’m afraid of is that too many bombs fail. They’re so old…” He glanced at the transmitter.

“We’ll just have to use lots,” Wuriu said. “And we don’t want to destroy the complex, we just want to distract the Topsidans. They’ll almost certainly be distracted when they find a heap of damp squibs.”

“Okay,” Rhodan said, then counted down on his fingers, “Number 1 is the energy supply, so that Lossoshér can begin preparing the transmitter. Number 2 is the Ferron bombs. The third thing we need is a Topsidian bomb for the energy shield. Wuriu, it’s your job to find out where the generator is. Number 4 is to set the detonators. Chaktor, if Lossoshér doesn’t need you, I would be grateful if you could take care of that. Then we’ll set Thora free and leave the planet. It’s not a simple plan, but it’s doable. Any questions?” He paused for a second. “None! Good. Then let’s get started!”

“So, one more time.” Lossoshér bent over the edge of the control panel. “If necessary, the energy can be supplied via this connection.”

“Have you ever done that?”

Lossoshér gave Tschubai a condescending look. “No, of course not. It has never been necessary. But I know from ancient writings that it was also done that way.”

“Great plan,” Tschubai murmured to himself.

“Did you say something?”

Tschubai cleared his throat. “I was talking to myself.”

The elderly Ferrone looked at him, a little confused. “I was sure that you said something to me.”

“It’s not important.” Tschubai made a dismissive gesture with his hands to divert attention away from his comments. *I hope the old Ferron understands that gesture*, he thought. “Chaktor and I will try to find a strong enough device. Once we manage to steal that from the Topsidans, I’ll leave the matter of connecting it up to you.”

“Thank you!”

“Then let’s go!” Tschubai and Chaktor disappeared towards the exit.

When they were out of earshot from Lossoshér, Chaktor turned to his companion. “Don’t be upset, Tschubai. The Guardians of the Thort have always been a little arrogant.”

“I’ll be grateful if he doesn’t detonate the entire desert fort when he tries to connect the Topsidian generator to his old transmitter.”

“There is a myth among us Ferrons that the city of Tandor was destroyed by a huge bolt of lightning because a Guardian pressed the wrong button on a transmitter.”

Tschubai came to a sudden halt. “Is that true?”

“No, not a word of it,” Chaktor said reassuringly. “I’m just trying to adjust to the human sense of humor.”

“Well, you’ve succeeded,” Tschubai told him.

“That one over there.”

“Are you sure?”

“Tschubai, that’s the building the Topsidans installed their generator in.”

“Okay, Chaktor. How do we want to get past the guards?”

The two of them studied the simple building before them. From where they were hiding they could see the two Topsidian guards standing in front of the entrance. There were no windows on the side of the building that they could see. The roof, which was about four meters high, was flat. Three Topsidans were patrolling on it, and they were keeping their eye on the surrounding area using displays.

“The war against the Ferron is obviously not yet won, Chaktor.

Otherwise the Topsidans wouldn't have such tight security measures in place to protect their buildings."

"You underestimate the military mindset. What would the guards do if they weren't on guard duty? Nothing! Not an option for a soldier. And so they guard something, in this case a building in which there is something worth protecting."

"Well, at least that tells us there is very little difference in the military thinking of the Ferrons, the humans, and the Topsidans."

"Ras, do you have any idea what's going on in there?"

"If we had Wuriu with us..."

"Then we would know more," Tschubai said, finishing Chaktor's sentence. "But we have only got our own talents to rely on. Jump in, have a look around—not an option if there are also soldiers on the inside."

"Exactly. Any suggestions?"

"Hm. It would be good if we could wait until the changing of the guard, but I don't think we have the time for that. At some point the Topsidans will discover the transmitter room. We need to be done with our bit before that happens."

"What about if we create a small diversion? If a building were to burn on the other side, then the guards would hopefully leave their posts to see what's going on."

"You're right, Chaktor, especially if there is a risk of the fire spreading to their building." Tschubai calmy inspected the surrounding buildings. "Over there. It not only appears to be empty, but it's also close enough to our building that they will have to do something about it."

"Then we need some combustible material." They looked at each other, indicating agreement. Quietly, and ducking down, they left their rooftop position and went into the building. A little later they were back on the roof carrying dusty army blankets.

“Will you manage to get over there?”

“The two of us, ten blankets, there and back. Yes, I’ll manage it. But it would be easier if we jumped straight into the large storage room right after the fire gets going.”

“We just have to wait until we’re sure that all of the guards are distracted.”

Tschubai laughed. “As dusty as these blankets are, there will definitely be lots of smoke. It will look much worse than it is.”

Chaktor tucked a blanket under his arm. Tschubai held one arm free so that he could give the other hand to Chaktor. He had four of the stale-smelling blankets under his other arm. “Shall we?”

A few minutes later, they had piled up the blankets below a window on the first floor that was facing the storage room. It took Chaktor a while to set them on fire, but once it got going, the smoke became so thick within only a few seconds that the two of them had difficulty finding their way to the exit to reach the next floor.

“And now we wait!”

Gray plumes of smoke were already spreading up the stairway when the first reactions came from the neighboring building. The Topsidans on the roof were gesticulating wildly towards the billowing smoke, then they pointed to the window where they could obviously already see flames. Shouts could be heard, and a handful of Topsidans came running out of the entrance into the storage room heading for the burning building.

“I believe that’s our signal. Any particular place we’re aiming for over there?” Tschubai asked Chaktor.

“The floor plans of the storage room don’t show all that much. But over there in that corner, there’s probably not much activity going on.” He pointed to the section of the storage room to their right.

“Good.” Tschubai took Chaktor’s hand, ducking down to a

squatting position when they landed in the storage room. Chaktor also tried to make himself as small as possible.

“Do you think there might still be somebody in here?” he whispered to Tschubai.

“Better safe than sorry,” Tschubai whispered back. Then he said, “Come on, see if you can find a suitable generator before the guards discover our pile of blankets and add one and one to make two.”

Chaktor disappeared, still in a ducked position, between some crates. Tschubai could not help him with this task, as he was unfamiliar with Ferron technology, so he remained where they had landed. He was starting to get nervous when Chaktor finally turned up with a large box on his shoulder.

“Doesn’t it come any smaller than that?”

“The Topsidans don’t seem to be friends of miniaturization, and the transmitter requires a lot of energy.”

“How do Ferrons solve problems like that?”

“Well, I hardly think I would have been able to carry a geothermal plant on my shoulders.”

At that very moment, the door to the storage room flew open. The Topsidan guards had obviously extinguished the pile of burning blankets and were now searching for the culprits. Tschubai looked skeptically at Chaktor and the box one last time, then he took his companion’s hand. A second later, they were gone from the storage room.

Rhodan had stayed behind with Lossoshér. As Wuriu’s powers were not needed for the time being, he went to have a look at the surrounding buildings.

“You have come a long way.”

Rhodan was surprised to hear Lossoshér suddenly break his silence. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t say very much about your home planet. Okay, so you received a call for help, but why did you respond to it? What kind of people rush off in reaction to a call for help from an unknown person to rescue a planet they’ve never even heard of?”

Lossoshér was looking at Rhodan almost reverently, which made him feel a little uncomfortable. He thought about Earth, its nation states, the unrest, and the system that was falling apart. Then the flight to the Moon, the extraterrestrial ship, Crest, Thora. The opportunity to fly through his own solar system. Terrania. The light of Vega. “We’re basically just like you.”

“That is what I find so confusing,” Lossoshér said. “The Topsidans are…beings from an alien world. Descendants of lizards. However, you are like us. We have very few differences and a great many similarities.”

“If you prick us, do we not bleed?” Rhodan quoted from memory. “If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you insult us, shall we not seek revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.”

The Guardian looked at Rhodan, a little puzzled.

“Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*. A great…bard on my home planet, you might say.”

“If you prick us, do we not bleed?” Lossoshér said nothing for a few seconds. “You are right.”

“It’s not about appearances,” Rhodan said. “We didn’t know what we would find when we set out. Speaking lizards, singing insects, jelly-like beings that communicate with illuminated antennae. We are very familiar with hardship, worry, and fear from our own history.”

“And that was enough for you to embark on this mission?”

No, that wasn’t the only reason, Rhodan thought. *We also came because you’re so close to our own front door. But that’s something that’s very hard to explain.* “Every civilization needs friends if it

wants to unlock the secrets of outer space."

"We know only our system. And it is full of wonders!"

We only know our own system... How happy I would be if we humans had achieved even that. Sometime in the future... "Wonders, surprises, threats, but always the possibility to make new friends."

"Light years apart and yet with an inner connection," Lossoshér added.

"Yes, that's it."

"Good! Then I will dedicate myself to the transmitter again, my friend Rhodan."

He turned to the machine, meaning he could not see the heartfelt smile that lit up Rhodan's face for a moment.

"Are you sure they didn't have any bigger machines?" Tschubai wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"They did actually, but I thought this one would be sufficient for our needs."

Tschubai turned towards Chaktor. Pearls of sweat caused streaks through the dust from dirty blankets and dirt from the red sand of the desert that coated the skin on his face. "Chaktor, that was sarcasm. A form of humor."

"Good. I was just wondering whether we would have to jump back in again and find a bigger device." Chaktor looked into Tschubai's astonished face. "That was a Ferron joke, Ras."

"Good. Then let's get out of here with the damned device before extremely nervous Topsidans turn up."

They reached for the device and lifted it up together, carrying it on foot back to the transmitter room in the hope that Lossoshér would manage to connect it to the transmitter and then reactivate it.

Lossoshér was both surprised and pleased when Chaktor and Tschubai turned up with the generator. “I didn’t expect you back so soon.”

“It was child’s play,” Tschubai said. “But unfortunately, we had to…scare the Topsidans a little.”

Rhodan looked over at Chaktor and Tschubai, a question in his eyes. Tschubai just shrugged, while Chaktor deliberately looked in the other direction.

“So we have to hurry, then. Lossoshér?”

“I’ll do what I can. I would be grateful for a little help here.”

Aha, that’s new, Rhodan thought. “I can give you a hand. Chaktor, I need to ask you two to fetch the Ferron bombs now, perhaps without attracting Topsidian attention this time.”

“The Ferron armory was not nearly as guarded as the Topsidian one. In fact, there was not one single guard there.”

“Good. Wuriu can continue to come up with a few suggestions about where we can strategically place the bombs. And we need access to the protective shield generator!”

Wuriu merely nodded.

18.

Freeing Thora

Rofus, desert fort

The Topsidans did not let the darkness hold them back. They had split up into smaller groups and were now combing through the facilities section, building for building. In the beginning, they were only on the lookout for Ferron resistance fighters who had lit a fire in one of the buildings. But, although Chaktor and Tschubai had made every effort not to be seen while distributing the bombs, neither of them was sure if they had managed to avoid all the surveillance cameras. The hectic way that the Topsidans were acting seemed to suggest that they had not succeeded.

Oh, what the hell, Rhodan thought. *If Lossoshér can't get the transmitter up and running, then we're trapped on this planet…with or without Thora.*

"Ras, are you sure the bomb has been attached to the generator for the protective shield?"

"Yes, Perry, but it's not *one* bomb. We're talking about an entire arsenal of bombs, as it's quite probable that there are a number of damp squibs among them."

"Good. Are the other bombs already in place?"

Tschubai nodded, while Chaktor answered simply with, "Yes!"

"Lossoshér?" Rhodan asked the elderly Ferron. "Is everything okay?"

The old man stood up and stretched his lower back. "The moment the bombs go off, I'll connect the generator. The Topsidans can detect that activity, but I'm hoping they have enough on their hands."

"And you're okay as far as setting the machine is concerned?"

"As we've deactivated the transmitter, I'll need a little time to calibrate it, but everything should be ready to go in about an hour of your time. And I also have assistance; Tschubai can help me when we need to operate the transmitter and the Topsidian device at the same time."

I can't use Ras until he's recovered anyway, so it makes sense for him to stay here and support Lossoshér. "But that also means we have to keep the Topsidans away from here for an hour."

The old man sighed. "I don't think we can be any faster than that."

"Got it, then we'll have to leave you here alone. Our command unit is small enough as it is. Wuriu?"

"I'll make sure that we don't get any unpleasant surprises from the Topsidian guards. And I'll be right behind you if any fighting breaks out."

Behind a very sparse front line, Rhodan thought. "Ras?"

"I'll stay here and help Lossoshér." His face showed no emotion.

Was he feeling left out? Rhodan asked himself. "Good. Chaktor?"

Chaktor was standing as straight as Lossoshér was. "The two of us will form what is known as the front line. If the protective shield falls, we'll be as close as possible to the other side of the building, far away from the bombs. We'll enter the prison complex as fast as we can, remove any resistance from the Topsidans, and then hurry to free Thora. Once we've managed that, we'll return here as fast as possible in the hope that Lossoshér has managed to get the transmitter going by then."

Rhodan looked disapprovingly at Chaktor.

"It's okay, he's right," Lossoshér said. "Young Ferron, you are right to deride me. I believed for all too long that we Guardians of the Thort were an elite because our forefathers were members of the elite troop. I am only too happy to admit it—without you, we would not have had a chance to see this task through to the end.

And I do not resent you expressing your resentment every now and again."

Chaktor looked very surprised by these words. Then he bowed his head a few centimeters respectfully towards the elderly Ferron. He also laid his left hand on his body just above his belly so that the tips of his index and middle fingers touched where his heart was. "May the Light be victorious."

Lossoshér bent forward in an identical gesture, his finger also on his chest. "May the Light be victorious."

Rhodan was crouching behind a protruding wall section, while Wuriukept an eye on the Topsidians by scanning the inside of the building.

"Can you recognize anything in the dark?" Rhodan whispered.

"If the light is on inside, then I can see fine," Wuriu answered.

Behind Rhodan, Chaktor was leaning on the wall, calmly holding a weapon in one hand. Rhodan looked at his watch and started his countdown: "Ten...nine...eight...seven...six..."

At six, the first explosions went off.

"Old bombs, old timers," Chaktor commented.

The only punctual detonation was the bomb positioned at the shield generator. There was a huge bang, and individual bombs exploded like fireworks every few seconds.

Wuriu continued scanning the building while Rhodan risked peeking over the wall. Despite the darkness, the soft glow of the shield was discernible. They were lucky—within the blink of an eye, the protective shield around the prison wing was gone.

Rhodan lifted the hand he was holding his weapon in. Then he dropped it again abruptly. "Go!"

He, Chaktor, and Wuriu sprinted in a ducked posture across the

square in front of the prison. They were not met with gunfire. The guards seemed to have enough on their plate.

The roles had been clearly assigned. Chaktor moved like a robot, his training paying off. They ran the few meters to the door and then took up position outside it. Chaktor melted the lock and smashed the door down with a strong kick. When it swung open, he jumped out of view, but still no gunfire came. He immediately rushed through the gaping door opening and inspected the long, moderately lit corridor, all with one fluid movement of his head.

"Nobody in sight!" he announced.

Rhodan and Wuriu followed him in.

"To the left!" Wuriu called out. Rhodan and Chaktor ran immediately in the direction of the corridor that he had indicated.

At that very same moment, a door opened on the left. Three Topsidans stepped out. One of them had blood running down his cheek. *His eardrums*, Rhodan thought to himself.

Chaktor immediately opened fire. Rhodan also fired. But Chaktor took out the three Topsidans in only a few seconds by aiming his shots at their chest.

"Was that really necessary?" Rhodan asked him.

"They are enemies of my people," Chaktor replied.

"And that's a reason to just kill them?"

"We have a job to do," Chaktor answered grimly.

"We'll talk about this later." Rhodan was upset by Chaktor's conduct. They had talked about disabling the guards, but nobody had said anything about aiming to kill.

They continued along the corridor. Whenever they came to a fork in their path, Sengu told them which way to go. He was the only one who knew his way around to some extent in this labyrinth. With Chaktor's help and the maps they had found, it had been

possible to make a picture of the complex in their mind's eye. However, it was up to Wuriu and his special powers as a seer to inform them of the details and tell them exactly where the Topsidans were.

Chaktor guessed that the Topsidans had simply taken over the Ferron cells. There were arrest cells along the outside wall of the building, used to punish disobedient soldiers, not all that secure, and therefore not suitable for a captured Arkonide woman. A second complex had cells that held several prisoners. As Thora was the only one of her people here, it was more likely that she was in a single cell, especially as such a cell was easier to secure.

They once again reached a fork.

"Which way?" asked Rhodan.

Wuriu looked to the left, then to the right, and then back to the left. He studied his destination for several seconds. This was enough time for a group of Topsidans to approach the end of the corridor to the right. The door swung open. In a flowing movement, Chaktor and Rhodan moved to the right. The Topsidans were taken aback—no wonder, at the sight of a Ferron and two other beings of a different color, who were also different in size and stature. Rhodan and Chaktor used the element of surprise to open fire.

Chaktor aimed at their upper bodies, while Rhodan tried to disable his opponents by hitting them in the legs or arms.

It was over fast. Before the Topsidans had been able to get off a single shot, Chaktor had killed them.

"We didn't want to kill!" Rhodan was furious.

"*You* didn't want to kill. In this matter, there is no *we*," Chaktor countered.

"This is not the time or place to speak about this," Rhodan spat out between clenched teeth. "But we will speak about it!"

Following Wuriu's instructions, they went along the corridor on the left.

“Is it far?”

The seer looked through the wall in front of them. “Another thirty meters along this corridor and then we’ll have reached the anteroom to the single cells.”

“Are there guards in the anteroom?”

“None. It seems we just got rid of the last ones.”

They hurried along the corridor. Chaktor opened the door to the anteroom in his usual way.

It looks like an Earth prison here, Rhodan thought. They could see three doors before them, but they could not see inside the cells at the moment, as the spy holes were covered by slider plates. The anteroom was bare. *No wonder the Ferrons haven’t used this building for centuries, or even millennia.* He looked around. All of the doors were locked.

“Where is Thora?”

Sengu scanned the doors. “There!” he said, pointing to the third door.

“Then, let’s go!” Chaktor lifted his weapon.

“Stop!”

They both turned towards Wuriu.

“What’s wrong?” Rhodan asked in an urgent tone.

“She’s not alone.”

“A guard?” Rhodan was surprised.

“A Topsidan, yes. But he doesn’t look like a guard.”

“What do you mean?” Rhodan was curious.

“He…older than the other Topsidans fighting here.”

“An officer!” Chaktor practically spat the word out.

“He’s not wearing a uniform,” Wuriu said after looking again. “And he has an eye patch...”

“Okay,” Rhodan said, “so not an officer. Maybe we’re in luck and he didn’t lock the door. Is Thora bound in any way?”

“Yes,” Sengu told him, “she’s got metal handcuffs on.”

Rhodan took a deep breath. “We have to risk it. I’ll pull open the door and run in with Chaktor behind me, understood?”

They both nodded. Rhodan grabbed the door handle and opened the door with momentum. He was unable to enter the room, as Chaktor immediately lifted his hand with the gun in it and shot at the Topsidan, who sank down the wall, hit by the bullet. Thora looked towards the door, a look of shock on her face.

“Rhodan?” she said in disbelief.

“No time to explain. We have to get away from here as fast as possible!” He reached for her hand to help her get up. The Topsidan groaned.

“I didn’t get him properly.” Chaktor said, lifting his weapon again.

“No!” Rhodan screamed, pushing Chaktor’s arm down. “There have been enough deaths! And this Topsidan is not a danger to us anymore. If you kill him now, it will be cold-blooded murder!”

Chaktor answered back angrily, “Then I’ll be doing exactly the same thing these lizards are doing to my people!”

“And that’s a reason to hit back with the same hate? What kind of people are you! You have ceased to shed blood among the Ferrons because the Light came to you. Does that Light only apply for Ferrons? Or to humans because we look so similar to you? And if someone is a lizard, will they will never experience a Light that puts an end to the bloodshed?” He had shouted himself into a rage.

Chaktor lowered his weapon. He did not say a word.

Wuriu came into the room. “We don’t have much time! There are Topsidans everywhere!”

Rhodan looked frantically around the anteroom. He discovered a kind of case with a clasp hanging on one of the walls which, if he was in an Earth prison, he would have immediately identified as a first aid kit. “Wuriu, bring me that case from the wall.”

The Japanese man fetched it immediately.

Chaktor was still standing there, his arm lowered. “Okay.” He put his gun back in his belt. Then he knelt down in front of Thora. “I’ll see if I can do anything about these handcuffs.”

A few seconds later, Wuriu came through the door holding the metal case in his hands. “How did you know?” he asked Rhodan.

“On Earth, this case would have been in exactly the same place. I don’t know where the similarities between Ferrons and humans end, but obviously not here.”

He opened the case and took out some bandages. “Chaktor, what do you use for disinfecting?”

Chaktor bent forward and pointed to the corresponding container. “Spray it on, wait three seconds, then apply the bandage.” He turned back to Thora.

Rhodan bandaged up the elderly Topsidan. He only turned back to his companions once the lizard was lying comfortably on the bunk that had been Thora’s up until a few minutes earlier.

“Now we can get out of here! Thora, can you walk?”

With Chaktor’s help, Thora had managed to get the handcuffs off. She was now rubbing her wrists to get the circulation going again. “Yes.”

“Good! Chaktor, Wuriu, we’ll go back the same way. Wuriu, scan ahead, and if nobody is in sight, we can move fast. Okay?”

19.

Escape from Rofus

Rofus, desert fort

They were making slow progress. Like bees in a beehive into which a firework had been thrown, the Topsidans swarmed out of the desert fort and, in mesmerizing patterns, combed its grounds again and again.

“Hopefully their measurements haven’t detected the transmitter yet,” Chaktor said, a note of worry in his voice.

“Well, they’ve lost an important prisoner, there was a fire and lots of explosions followed by a break-in. I hope they don’t try to capture the Ferron insurgents they suspect are here before they make intricate measurements and get their bearings.” Rhodan knew this was no more than a hope. They couldn’t be sure whether the Topsiders had a routine they could deploy to combat the Ferron insurgency.

Rhodan saw that Chaktor was having great difficulty just moving and choosing the fastest route to their destination—he would have disabled any Topsidian resistance with armed force. He seemed edgy and kept moving his jaw as if he were grinding his teeth to prevent himself from uttering words he might have regretted later on.

Is it so difficult not to see others as an enemy straight away? thought Rhodan. *But if the lizards had attacked Earth, would I really be acting any differently?*

He surveyed the small troop lined up before him. They had all accepted him as their commander, so he was responsible for the well-being of this small band, now joined by Thora due to a strange set of circumstances.

Sengu made sure the way ahead was safe by peering into the

adjacent rooms. Again and again, they had been forced to take detours to avoid a gang of Topsidans who were searching for them frantically. Time was of the essence...but their journey was slow.

If only Ras could get us all out of here.

Yet Rhodan knew he should be grateful to have access to such special powers at all.

He and Chaktor were responsible for disabling the Topsidans who stood in their way when they couldn't manage to avoid them, but they had managed to avoid them so far. The closer they came to their destination, however, the more difficult it was becoming.

They had tried to avoid the exterior grounds as much as possible. In the darkness, they depended on artificial light, and this was also visible from afar in the desert night. Sometimes they had no option, however. One time, they ran through an inner courtyard, gasping for breath as they reached a pile of debris that acted as cover.

Rhodan looked around, and his gaze fell on a tower that was lit by spotlights. It had to be ancient. Its tip was missing; it must have fallen victim to the ravages of time or a battle. The tower was dazzling, with lots of colors. On its walls were tiles, which formed mosaics. For a moment, he wondered what sort of stories they might tell, then he forced himself back to the present. They had to keep going.

They ducked and ran into the next building, then went along a corridor. All of a sudden, Wuriu came to a stop in front of them. He looked left, then right; he was scanning rooms again through the walls.

"Perry, our path is blocked. Wherever we turn, we come up against Topsidans!"

"In all directions?"

"At the moment, we're between Scylla and Charybdis," the small Japanese man said.

"Where are they?" asked Chaktor quietly.

“He was comparing our situation to fairy tales from an old kingdom on our home planet,” Rhodan explained. “In the story, there’s a narrow strait guarded by two monsters. If you manage to escape one danger, you face the next and vice versa. So you’re stuck between Scylla and Charybdis.”

“What do we do now?” Chaktor asked.

Rhodan looked at his watch. Time was becoming increasingly tight, and there were lots of uncertain factors: whether Lossoshér would get the transmitter working within the agreed-upon time, whether the Topsidans were able to detect the device and take it before then, whether the the energy supply would hold out.

“We have no time to go back and find another way. Every extra minute we lose gives them more time to discover the transmitter. And the more agile we are, the more seriously the Topsidans will take us as an opponent.”

“And like a bunch of pirates following a treasure map, we’re leading them blindly to the treasure—the transmitter!” Wuriu exclaimed.

“You’re right,” Rhodan conceded. “But we have no choice; we have to keep them moving so that they don’t find the transmitter, and we will have to reach the transmitter as quickly as possible so we can leave this planet.”

“If we keep trying to avoid killing Topsidans and hurting our enemies, we’ll never get there on time!” Chaktor could barely contain his anger.

“I will not go through the corridors killing people,” Rhodan objected, managing to keep his voice calm.

“But we have to give first aid to the Topsidans if we shoot at them, don’t we?” Chaktor was now becoming cynical. “That is precisely the time we’ve lost and that we’re lacking now.”

“I’m not here to kill people.” Rhodan remained quiet although this was no doubt the wrong time and place for a discussion about

morals with Chaktor. Actually, it was the wrong time and place for any sort of discussion.

To Rhodan's surprise, Thora jumped into the conversation. "Sparing the Topsidan from death was the right decision."

Rhodan turned round towards her. Was this the same arrogant Arkonide woman who was prepared to blot out human lives without even considering for a second whether they were thinking, sentient beings?

"But were they our prisoners?" Chaktor was flabbergasted.

"Even so. It would have been wrong to let the lizard die." Thora folded her arms, using a gesture that any Earth woman would have comprehended straight away. "These Topsidans were no threat to us!"

Chaktor was about to contradict her when Rhodan interjected, "First the Topsidans, then the transmitter, then hopefully the Thort. Until then, we continue doing as I say. We are not here to kill people." Rhodan stared at Chaktor. "Chaktor, I know that this is your planet and the Topsidans are your enemies. But I beg you to forget your anger for a moment. Anger and grief are the last thing we need in a situation like this!"

The Ferron man winked. Then he turned away, spitting in a wide arc into the corner of the room. *A human being would have sweat on their forehead by now*, Rhodan thought.

"Good." Chaktor's voice sounded as if he had himself under control again, and he then turned back to Rhodan. "Good," he said again, "by the Light."

This answer satisfied Rhodan. "Wuriu, which side is less dangerous?"

The mutant turned to the left. "This door."

Rhodan and Chaktor were a well-rehearsed team by now. Chaktor kicked down the door. His physical strength was greater than that of a human being, as the gravity of this planet was lower

than on his home planet. Both then jumped into the room at once and opened fire on the four Topsidans, who appeared to be busy rifling through cupboards and lockers for more Ferron bombs.

Rhodan fired two shots. He managed to disable one opponent by shooting him in the leg while the other collapsed from a shot in his upper body. Rhodan noticed that Chaktor did not kill either of his opponents but rather disabled them. He glanced at the walls of the room.

“Wuriu?”

“Farther along on the right.”

They scurried through the room, down a corridor and along another. Wuriu managed to warn them about approaching patrols twice. One time, they hid in a storeroom while a large gang of Topsidans ran past them in the direction they had just been coming from.

When the sound of the steps had faded outside, Thora turned quietly to Rhodan. “Give me a weapon too.”

“You want to help us?”

“I wanted to help you the whole time, Earthling. But the handcuffs numbed my fingers. And it’s not much good in battle if you don’t know for certain where you’re firing.”

Rhodan handed her a weapon. “Thank you!”

She looked at him in surprise. “For what?”

He leaned towards her, not wanting Chaktor or Wuriu to hear what he was saying. “For what you said about not killing the Topsidan.” Before she had time to reply, he had stood up straight again. “Wuriu, can we?”

The Japanese man nodded.

“Then let’s go! Come on!”

The next ten minutes were a hectic, rapid succession of opened doors, running Topsidian guards, and long corridors. Without Chaktor, who had memorized the map of the grounds so well that he always knew precisely where he was in the desert fort complex, and Sengu, who often warned them about patrols or rooms filled with guards at the last moment, they wouldn't have managed it.

They had to go the last hundred meters at walking pace, then cross an open area in order to reach the building where the transmitter was. Chaktor made sure the transmitter could not be accessed via any other building.

They had almost crossed the section of red desert when first Chaktor, then the others, were suddenly lit up by the white circle of a searchlight. Thora was quick-witted enough to turn around and aim a shot at the lens to disable it.

The light disappeared immediately but the damage was done. There were loud cries from Topsidan soldiers, shots in their direction. The enemy now knew where they were.

They sheltered in the entrance area of the transmitter building.

"Wuriu, tell Ras and Lossoshér we're here. They should get the transmitter ready. We'll try and delay the Topsidans for as long as possible."

Wuriu disappeared along the corridor to the rear while Chaktor fired into the darkness in anger again and again.

"If they get a heavy device to shoot at us, we'll be done for," said the Ferron.

"They want us alive," Thora explained. "I was their prisoner. They didn't kill me the first time, so they won't do it this time either."

"They won't get us." Rhodan sounded more confident than he was. "I believe in the abilities of the Guardian."

"Guardian?" Thora's voice distracted him briefly.

“Thora, I’ll tell you the story another time.” To stop her from questioning him further, he fired at the edge of the roof of the building opposite. *There are so many damned conversations I’m postponing for the future,* he thought. *Hopefully, I’ll keep all my promises.*

Chaktor ducked below another volley of shots. “They want to force us to take cover so that they can attack the building directly.”

Where is Wuriu? Rhodan wondered. He tried to peer out, but fierce shots forced him back into the corridor.

“Perry—go!” Suddenly Ras Tschubai was standing next to him.

Rhodan pressed his hand onto the other man’s shoulder and forced him down onto his knees. “It’s too dangerous!”

Tschubai dropped down next to him, taking cover. “It was the quickest way. Come on, we’re ready.”

“Lossoshér?”

“Perry, I think he’s managed it.” The Sudanese man tried to sound convinced.

“Then let’s get out of here.” Rhodan turned to the others. “When I give the signal, let them have it with all the fire power we have. Then we’ll go back into the room where the transmitter is as fast as we can. Let’s go!”

Chaktor and Rhodan jumped up, firing mostly blank shots. Thora provided support, firing shots at the edge of the roof and into the windows of the building opposite. The Topsidian counterfire stopped for a moment.

“Let’s get out of here!”

Lossoshér was standing in front of the transmitter, which was buzzing and glowing. “I’ve connected the Topsidian energy supply. I can’t guarantee it will last forever, though. So we’ll have to hurry up!”

He pressed a button. The buzzing of the generator fell an octave. The glowing of the St. Elmo's fires started up again. Rhodan felt the hair on his forearms standing on end.

Shots could be heard from the other side along with the heavy steps of charging Topsidans.

"Ready!" Lossoshér pressed a button. He took two steps towards the transmitter and disappeared within its frame. Thora and Wuriu followed, then Tschubai, and finally Rhodan himself.

Once again it was like taking a giant step onto a staircase where the steps were of uneven heights.

A small step that folds together space and time. A sort of dimension breaker...

Rhodan shook off his malaise straight away.

What?

The nape of his neck was tingling as if the St. Elmo's fire was still creeping up his back. He looked around quickly.

The room was similar to that on Rofus. Lossoshér was busy with Chaktor, switching off the transmitter as quickly as possible to prevent it from being tracked by the Topsidans. Wuriu looked around, concentrating, no doubt scanning the adjacent rooms. Tschubai was staring spellbound at a man who was looking back at him with a friendly smile.

Is that the Thort? No, Rhodan realized immediately.

He inspected the figure. The man seemed somehow familiar to him. He was about 180 centimeters tall with short brown hair. And below the hair...He had seen those eyes before somewhere.

Rhodan felt like someone had pulled a rug out from beneath his feet. It's—*Ernst Ellert!*

20.

There's no place like home

Earth

3 August, 2036

The buzzing kept coming back. For hours on end, there was nothing to hear and then it would loudly announce its return.

At last, it was no longer alone in the room. People came in, set up odd-looking equipment to measure its activities. The buzzing was happy as it moved closer to its goal—step-by-step, sound-by-sound.

The buzzing took on a new quality. It was now a happy buzzing, delighted with the attention it was receiving from the mortals.

In another room of the same underwater dome off the Azores, an old man sat bare-chested on the examination table with his legs dangling over the side. A woman in a white coat stood next to him, having just examined his ears. A younger woman was leaning against the wall, observing the proceedings with her arms at her sides.

At first glance, you might have assumed that the old man was a human. But his red eyes and especially the lack of ribs protruding through his skin revealed that this was not the case. The woman's face was Asian, perhaps Korean or Japanese.

"Crest, I thought you were starting to hallucinate there!" Doctor Himo turned towards her patient. "Then I thought your hearing range might be wider than that of a human."

Crest smiled warmly at the small Japanese doctor. "Does that mean I'm a non-human? A demon? A *Gninusha* maybe, or a tax inspector?"

Himo looked down at the translator before turning to Crest. “Tax inspector? Are they all non-humans back on Arkon?”

Crest gave another of his subtle smiles. “I don’t think we know enough about each other’s culture to be able to understand every cultural reference. Something appears to have been lost in translation there. You can’t expect every first contact to go smoothly.”

Michalovna intervened from her position by the wall. “Crest, if I’ve understood things correctly, this is certainly not the first contact between humans and Arkonides. Arkonides set up a base and sank a spaceship here a long time ago. That means you would be a second contact at the most.”

“What’s the point of a first contact if nobody notices it?” Crest asked her.

“What sound does one clapping hand make?” interjected Himo. The other two looked at her, bewildered. “That was a Kung-an; you know them better as Koans. Zen. But just as important and meaningful as the issue of first contact with someone who has had no contact.” She patted Crest on the shoulder. “We’re done here; you can go looking for your buzzing if you like because your hearing seems completely fine to me. Your perception too.”

“I’m almost grateful,” said Crest, pulling on his top again.

All of a sudden, the buzzing noise was back. Crest and Himo looked at each other in confusion while Michalovna calmly pulled out a small black box from her pocket.

“Stay calm,” she said to the other two. The device opened, and the buzzing stopped. “Michalovna!”

Nobody said anything for a while. The only sound that could be heard was a quiet voice from the device. Michalovna answered it with “Yes,” “Yes,” and “Immediately.” She closed the device again and pocketed it. “Crest, there’s a bonafide reason for your fantastic buzzing.”

“And?” asked the Arkonide curiously.

“Not here,” said Michalovna looking over at the doctor.

“I get it,” said Himo. “My security clearance is probably about ten levels below the one you need to be allowed to even know who Miss Michalovna is talking to. I’ve just finished anyway. I’ll wait outside for a minute, okay?” She swept out into the corridor without waiting for an answer.

Once the door had closed, Crest looked at Michalovna in anticipation. “What?”

Michalovna took a deep breath. “Crest, you aren’t imagining this buzzing. It was really in the room. It’s the transmitter—it’s repairing itself!”

Crest asked the doctor to come back in. “Thank you for your help. I was starting to get worried,” he said.

She smiled. “You’d be surprised if you knew how many people down here hear things.”

Crest shook her hand in a very human manner. “Doctor Himo, there’s one more thing I’d like.”

She looked at him in a puzzled way. “Another examination?”

“No.” Crest smiled at her in a friendly manner. “There’s a clipboard and paper at the end of this examination couch. Could you lend me something similar?”

The doctor was perplexed. “But there are modern methods...”

“I know,” the Arkonide said. “But sometimes it’s easier just to write something down. And I like the way paper feels to the touch.”

Michalovna also looked skeptical, but Himo gave Crest the clipboard as requested, as well as a pencil and sheaf of paper. They were received with a grateful smile.

He left the ward along with Michalovna, heading in the direction

of the transmitter room.

The transmitter room was in an uproar . Mercant and several scientists were expecting them. Their conversations fell silent as Crest and Michalovna entered the room.

Crest glanced at the transmitter that now looked more complete than a few hours earlier. There was a strange ozone-like smell in the air, and a longer look at the transmitter revealed that blue sparks appeared to be dancing out of if like St. Elmo's fire in some places.

"Impressive technology," said Crest.

"We were hoping you would tell us that it's an Arkonide secret," replied Mercant drily.

He looked at Crest inquiringly. Crest had dressed after the doctor's examination, but the clipboard in his hand made him look as though he were an accountant from another century who had turned up to take an inventory of the equipment.

"I'm sorry to have to disappoint you there," answered Crest. "This is not Arkonide technology. It's...different. Probably more advanced. Much more advanced, when I think about it."

"But what does it do? And who created it?" Mercant looked inquisitively at the transmitter.

"A working transmitter, if I'm not mistaken. It creates a path to another place." *And this other place will hopefully bring me closer to the solution to the great mystery—the mystery of eternal life! This technology is way beyond anything we Arkonides could make.*

Mercant's voice jolted him out of his thoughts. "Then who created it? How did it get here?"

"I don't know," replied Crest. "But whoever built it certainly knew what they were doing...and the device would not be in an Arkonide base unless somebody was intending to use it here or it was set up for them to use here. And that's exactly what I'd like to do now—use it."

A silence fell over the room. Everybody looked at him incredulously. Mercant was the first to find his voice again. “Crest, you are much too important to us. Without you, we’d just be humans among humans. We’d be on our own with all this,” he made a sweeping gesture that was intended to include the deepsea dome “Completely alone.”

Crest gave an inscrutable smile. “Then, Mr. Mercant you’ll be in the same position with Arkonide technology as I am with that thing there.” He pointed, to the transmitter. “I’m actually an Arkonide *Derengar*. There’s no work for this in your language. I’d translate it as being something between an explorer and a scientist. I am just as fascinated by this technology as you are by ours. I simply have to know.” *And I need to find the secret behind it*, he added in his head.

“But—” Mercant objected.

Crest cut him off mid-sentence with a hand gesture. “Mr. Mercant, I will take Miss Michalovna along with me. The two of us in Arkonide armor—I don’t think there are many things that could stop us if we’re talking about technology on your level. But if there are defense mechanisms on the other side that are as technologically advanced as the transmitter, then it really won’t matter how many soldiers you send along with me.”

Mercant looked at him thoughtfully. “Crest, give me a bit of time to think this over.”

“Three hours. I need some time myself to get ready. Is that enough for you?”

“What choice do I have?” Mercant resigned himself to the situation.

Crest sat in his cabin. He wanted to use the time to prepare a few things. A last letter with a few explanations that was to be opened if he did not return within three days. He also pondered what he should take with him.

His mind kept drifting back to what would happen if he really

found eternal life on the other side. What could he achieve if he were young again? Healthy, fit and agile—completely different from the other Arkonides, who were becoming ever more addicted to gaming. He could do so much more if he only had more time. Not the couple of years he could expect from this body, but decades, centuries, millennia. He would be eternally young, constantly healthy, and full of life. He could restore the former glory of the Arkonides. Explore the Milky Way.

He would never be forced to work with these humans again. He would be surrounded by Arkonides who were on his level culturally as opposed to these inferior beings. Arkon, a stellar system rather than a planet that wasn't even ruled by a single government.

Suddenly, there was a voice in his head. His oldest and best friend. He had been silent for a long time. *Crest da Zoltral…what do you really want?*

What do you mean? This is what I really want.

You want to explore the Milky Way with Arkonides? You want to be young and full of life again? You want to be like…humans?

Crest didn't know how to answer himself.

The elderly Arkonide entered the transmitter room in his combat suit. In one hand he was holding the clipboard to which he had attached the prepared letters. Michalovna was already going through the last checks of her combat gear.

Mercant was waiting for him. "Crest, have you had time to think this through?"

"More than enough," he replied.

"And?"

"I'm going,"

"The risk is much too great. At least take a couple of soldiers with you and not just Tatiana Michalovna."

Crest looked over at the mutant. She seemed to not have given any thought to whether it would be wiser to take soldiers along.

It would mean more people who know our secret, Crest thought. "Mercant, there is nothing that even a thousand soldiers can alter if this appliance is protected on the other side. I don't want to have to fight. I want to explore. I want to research. And who could be more suitable a companion for that than Miss Michalovna?"

Mercant was forced to agree through gritted teeth. "And what if something happens to you?"

"That's a risk I'm willing to take, and I will take full responsibility for it."

The former agent gave him a studied look. "Crest, that's a very human argument."

Crest continued checking his equipment. "You've got me there, Mercant. I suppose I must have learned something during my stay on your planet." He finished checking his combat suit without another word from the other man. Then he turned back to address him. "I want to entrust a couple of letters to you. Make sure they are delivered if we're not back within seventy-two hours." Crest handed him the clipboard with the envelopes.

"You have my word." Mercant took the clipboard and shook the Arkonide's hand once more.

Crest looked over at his companion. Michalovna gave him a thumbs up, and they stepped onto the platform of the transmitter together. It seemed to be aware that someone was preparing for transmission. The buzzing grew louder, the energy supply ramped up. Crest's gloved hand approached the transmission switch. Then he hesitated.

Who were you writing to there? asked the voice inside his mind. *Who are you going to miss?*

Crest wanted to shake off these nagging thoughts, but he couldn't stop picturing himself writing the letters in his cabin. *Not*

to Thora…I'll never see her again. But to Mercant. A letter of explanation. To Bull and Rhodan in the hope that they'll read the letter at some point. And to the human scientists—a kind of legacy.

Crest looked around the room. Mercant was watching them expectantly. Michalovna turned towards him in confusion. The scientists had been studying the dials of the measuring equipment, but the delay caused them to shift their gaze back to the platform.

Crest let his hand drop. *My legacy…belongs to the humans, doesn't it?* The voice fell silent. *The transmitter…that is not our way.*

Not anymore, my dear friend, answered the voice. *Not anymore.*

Crest stepped down from the platform and opened the visor of his combat suit. "Mercant, could I have my letters back?"

Mercant handed him the clipboard with a puzzled look.

"I think it's better if I stay among you humans and hand the letters over in person."

Episode 14: The Giants of Pigell

By Wim Vandemaan

Prologue

The Earth

Later

"You know," he begins, then looks straight ahead and thinks. For a moment, he looks directly into the camera. He knows, of course, that he's not supposed to look at the camera. But he's not used to having cameras pointed at him.

Not yet.

"Yes?" asks the woman across from him.

"Let me put it his way. As a child, I had a dream of traveling to Tokyo. For my mother and me, Tokyo was too far, the journey too expensive. I wanted to stand in a pachinko hall and hear the thundering military music, to immerse myself in the underground markets of Shinjuku, to ride the Yamanote Line, of course, around in a circle, because I already knew the melody of each individual station. I even wanted to visit the port where Admiral Perry came in with his black fleet and burst open the cocoon Japan had been sleeping in." He smiles. "Isn't it funny that it's another Perry who's bursting open *our* cocoon? With ships again? Even if they're Arkonide spacecraft this time?"

The woman nods. The name "Admiral Perry" means nothing to her.

"I actually did it in the end. I went to Tokyo. In a pachinko hall, I lost the amount of money I'd allowed myself in less than half an hour. Then I picked a few balls up off the floor—unseemly, I know—but with those, I won a whole pile of balls and traded them in for some packs of ramen and a can of rambutan for my mother. I was in the neighborhood of the lucky god shrines, in the Kiyosumi Garden, where something is always in bloom. And of course, I rode the Yamanote Line. But..."

He cuts himself off.

“What I’m trying to say is, it was all so *real*. It didn’t feel anything like being in the city of my dreams. Quite the opposite. Tokyo transformed my home, Fukushima, into a dream world. Into...”

He pauses again.

“A nightmare world?” the woman suggests.

Tako Kakuta smiles. “No,” he says quietly, but in a tone that makes a clear statement to her: *That topic is closed.*

At this point, the woman—a reporter for the BBC—senses something emanating from the short, lanky man. Something related to his childhood in the quiet hell of Fukushima. An area that was not, she now begins to realize, the hellscape she has seen in European media depictions. Something about that place is present in him. Something that, in an intangible way, brings him closer to the Topsidans, to the Ferrons, to that alien world under a sun that makes the Earth’s star look like a miniature model.

Something. But what?

It’s on the tip of her tongue, but she can’t find a way to express it. Knowing how to express ideas is her job. She’s good at her job. Usually.

He says, “It was similar in the Vega system. There was nothing surreal about it, nothing dream-like. It was just my environment. The surreal, the dream—that was Earth.”

“I understand,” the reporter says.

“Yes,” he continues, and she realizes that she is lying.

She gives him time. She gives herself time too. Suddenly, she knows that he’s searching for the right words. She’s finally ready to listen to him.

He says, “You know, here on Earth, a lot of people picture the

Topsidans as alligators walking on their hind legs. Like the organ-playing alligators in that Disney movie, only not playing the organ. Mythical creatures."

She nods while thinking, *Aren't they?*

"They are lizards, of course. Gator-like. But that's only a vague approximation. Less, even. A faint reflection."

He looks at her, helpless. She nods at him. He falls silent. She nods again.

He says, "They're totally different."

What a meaningless sentence, she thinks, but at the same time, she feels the hair standing up on the back of her neck. *He must be right. He's the one who looked the Topsidans in the eye. The aliens.*

He seems not to know what else to say. She clears her throat.

"What impressed you the most, Mr. Kakuta?" As soon as she says it, she feels like slapping herself for the rookie-level question. But it's too late to take it back. The camera's running. They're on the air. Live.

He says, "That I survived." He smiles crookedly. It's the first time she's seen him smile. "In the jungle of Pigell."

She nods, wanting to say, *That's not an applicable answer.* The question is still hanging in the air. He nods back as if to say, *I know.*

"It might not even have been the Topsidans," he tells her. "It was... No, it wasn't the unbelievable darkness deep in the jungle either." He closes his eyes.

She thinks, *Now he's back again. Out there, under a different sun, light years away. No human has ever been farther from Earth than he has.*

He opens his eyes again and seeks her gaze. Despite herself, she has to smile. She's pretty. She's had experience with men. She thinks, *When they look you in the eye like that, that's when they're*

lying most shamelessly.

But why would he lie?

He's made his decision. "What impressed me the most were the giants of Pigell."

She nods. She has no idea what he's talking about. She asks, "Would you mind telling our viewers something about these giants?"

"Not at all," he says. He smiles at her and closes his eyes again.

1.

End of the Line

Pigell, in the Vega System

This was the day Tako Kakuta would meet Bechia Yuaad for the first time. The Ferron woman, who called herself an “Appeal,” was short, maybe a meter and a half in height, and more slender than most of her species. Her skin was a pale, almost ceramic shade of blue. She wore her copper-colored hair in a short and unceremonious style. Her face was a wide oval shape, almost round. Her forehead protruded less than Ferrons’ usually did.

She would look at him with green, glassy eyes.

She would study him.

He would hold still, but he would keep his face opaque.

She and Anne Sloane would briefly talk with each other. After a while, they’d turn away and walk over to the edge of the clearing, where one of the giants was licking up the rainfall.

Then Kakuta would see that she was limping slightly.

He wouldn’t observe any bandage, any leg brace. *Probably not an injury,* he would think. *She walks as if it’s nothing unusual. As if she’s used to her limp. A congenital issue or an impairment received at a young age.*

For some reason, she would turn around again and look at him.

And the day would take a new turn.

“We’re getting slower,” Conrad Deringhouse said softly. At twenty-four, he was the youngest of the group, a year younger, in fact, than Kakuta himself. Kakuta cast a worried glance at him. The painkillers had kicked in. They hadn’t strengthened Deringhouse,

however. Had they even made him more sensitive? Where in the Vega system, light years from Earth, could they find help? The Topsidans would be hunting for them. At least Kakuta, Deringhouse, and the two women had succeeded in their escape from the prison camp on Ferrolia. They'd left the moon behind.

They'd left Nyssen behind too. Dead.

"We're getting slower?" Anne Sloane asked. "Are you absolutely sure?"

Deringhouse replied with a labored nod.

"He's right," said Darya Morozova.

Sloane looked at Kakuta. "How close are we to the planet's surface?"

Shaking his head as if to shoot her idea down, he said, "Too far for sure. Much too high for a jump."

"Even if you push yourself?"

He turned his head away without a word. He was a teleporter. His gift allowed him to jump up to two kilometers in an instant. But after the jump, he had to recover. Depending on how hard he had strained himself, it could take up to half an hour to get his strength back.

They fell silent. It was not a comfortable silence. Kakuta felt Sloane's gaze drilling into the back of his head. *Guardian of the North!* Kakuta thought, invoking the god Bishamonten.

"We're landing," he heard Deringhouse murmur.

Kakuta also felt like the troop carrier was dropping. Or was he imagining it? At any rate, Vega IV, a.k.a. Pigell, had to be very close now.

The Topsidans had brought the Vega system under control with their armada. The invaders' arsenal had encompassed close to five hundred ships, including not only the two-hundred-and-fifty-meter-

long warships, but also the eight-hundred-meter juggernauts that handled the transport of troops and cargo. The Ferrons hadn't been able to put up any meaningful opposition in space.

Space had been the easy part, however. Even for the technologically superior Topsidans, conquering the settled planets presented other problems of military logistics. Once they had taken Ferrol, they would set about breaking Ferron resistance on the other worlds.

This included Pigell. From what Kakuta knew, their flight's destination was a steaming, sizzling jungle world. Whole continents were beset by continual rain for weeks on end, but it didn't necessarily bring any coolness with it.

They had smuggled themselves aboard in a shipping container after Morozova had hunted for a suitable one heading away from Ferrolia. She could speak a little Topsidian and understood a little more than that. She'd gained the knowledge with an almost intuitive ease.

The container was bound for a deployment to Pigell—far from Ferrol, far from the camp. Kakuta was sure that the Russian woman had also chosen this container and ship to grant Anne Sloane a certain distance. Sloane was far from getting over Rod Nyssen's death. It had cast a kind of bitter shadow over her.

He had watched as Sloane took and pocketed one of Nyssen's packs of cigarettes—a souvenir almost pitiful in its profanity. She had used her telekinetic powers to unseal and open the container, then used them to pick up and remove a large portion of the contents as well. Nonetheless, it was still quite full. Glass barrels held the liquid nutrients that formed a major component of Topsidian meals. There were also canisters full of pharmaceutical products and some sacks of sand or dust that Morozova suspected were used for ritual purposes. No weapons, no defensive shield projectors.

Kakuta had managed to at least teleport one vat of fresh water on board, plus the two empty buckets and hygiene products that Morozova had asked for. They didn't know how long the flight to

Pigell would last. Then, Sloane had telekinetically closed the container and restored the seal on the outside.

The ship began to vibrate, then to shake more strongly. Violent tremors followed. It sounded like an old passenger plane extending its landing gear.

“We’re entering the atmosphere,” Deringhouse commented.

Moments later, the flight grew calmer again. Then the ship landed.

“Pigell. End of the line,” Anne Sloane said. “All out.”

Kakuta glanced at Morozova. She nodded. “We should get out, of course. How’s it looking, Tako? Can you jump?”

Kakuta nodded back. “Yes. The question is how much sense a jump makes. We don’t know where we’ve landed. In the middle of a Topsidian spaceport? In a camp? We’d be jumping right into captivity. Or are we somewhere in the jungle? What then?”

“What’s your suggestion? Stay here and let them fly us all the way back?” Sloane’s voice sounded caustic.

Morozova raised her eyebrows inquisitively.

“It’s a transport ship,” Kakuta said. “There are troops on board, and equipment. Probably combat gliders that are ready for deployment. With a combat glider, we’d be mobile. We’d have a”—he searched for the words—“a shelter. A new tank full of water. Food. Clothing.”

Anne Sloane stared at him. “Above all, we’d have the Topsidans on our tails. They’d find it considerably easier to locate a glider than four people keeping a low profile in the jungle.”

“Maybe,” he conceded.

“Well then,” she said, gesturing to Morozova and Deringhouse, “take those two outside. I can hold out a while longer here.”

Kakuta said, “Teleport them yourself.”

She shook her head disapprovingly. “You coward.”

Instead of replying, he teleported on his own.

Half an hour later, he came back. “I found a glider. A hangar with three of them, actually. They must be reserves. A large portion of the troops have left the ship.”

“Are the gliders unguarded?” Deringhouse asked.

“One guard for all three.”

“Sounds sensible,” said Deringhouse. Morozova nodded.

Sloane pressed her lips together. Finally, she nodded. “Let’s give it a try.”

They waited until Kakuta had recovered. Then he teleported into the glider with Sloane. She looked around. “Where’s the Topsidan?”

“In one of the other two gliders, I assume. Or maybe he left the hangar already.”

They heard a sound from the vehicle’s tiny hygiene cell. The door opened, and one of the lizard beings stepped out, clapping a kind of cleaning powder off its hands.

The Topsidan stared at the two of them, then silently collapsed.

“Did you kill him?” Kakuta asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous. She’s just unconscious. All I did was put pressure on the blood supply to her brain. She’ll wake up soon enough.”

Kakuta nodded despite his doubts. How did Sloane know what effects her telekinetic intrusion could have on a Topsidian brain?

“How do you know it’s a ‘she’?”

Sloane looked at him like he was stupid. “Because I felt *her* organs, of course.”

He tried to imagine how it must feel when someone with telekinetic powers reached inside a person’s body. When she felt the organs. When she stopped the heart. *Guardian of the North!* he thought. “I’ll get the others now,” he said before jumping back into the closed container.

Deringhouse was glad to sit down in one of the cockpit’s two pilot seats. He barely felt the notch in the lower backrest; the pneumatic seat was wonderfully comfortable even for humans. “Respect to the Topsidian ergonomists.” He grinned.

Along with Morozova, they’d soon familiarized themselves with the control console.

“Got it all figured out?” Sloane prompted them.

“Ready for our first flying lesson,” Morozova replied.

Deringhouse pointed out the wraparound cockpit window at the two other gliders. He asked Morozova, “Can you get those two ready to fly?”

“You want to take three gliders?” Sloane asked.

Deringhouse shook his head. “If possible, I want to control the others remotely. If we’re shot at, they won’t be able to concentrate their fire on one glider.”

“Good plan,” Sloane said, then nodded in encouragement to Morozova.

Kakuta watched Morozova leave the glider with a touch of disapproval. Was Sloane in command now?

“Something wrong?” Sloane asked him.

“Yes,” he said. “What if the hangar’s under video surveillance? So far no one has seen us, but now—”

An alarm rang out through the ship. Morozova turned and ran back to their glider.

The Topsidan on board made soft wheezing sounds. She tried to push herself up. In one step, Kakuta was next to her; he teleported her outside and set her down by the entrance to the glider. Morozova stormed past her, and Kakuta followed her back in.

“Bravo,” Sloane said. “If the Topsidans didn’t know they were dealing with a teleporter before, they do now.”

Morozova threw herself into the pilot’s chair, and Kakuta sat down next to Sloane. The safety brackets slid out of the backrests, surrounding his rib cage without getting too tight.

The glider’s propulsion unit buzzed to life. Deringhouse rapidly flicked his hands across the sensor keys. The hangar’s hatch slid apart.

“Here we go!” Morozova said.

The acceleration pushed Kakuta into his seat. They only got a brief view of the clearing that had served as a landing site for the troop carrier.

Morozova steered the glider sharply upwards. The treetops were an expansive green sea below them. Rain pattered against the window, robbing them of their sight. Kakuta felt as if they were flying through a green Choya bottle.

The rain thrummed. No one spoke. Kakuta realized he was holding his breath. The com unit activated itself, and he heard the voice of a Topsidan.

“What does he want?” Sloane asked.

Morozova, who spoke a little Topsidian, said, “The daily code, and information about where we’re flying and why we didn’t register our flight.”

Morozova went full throttle. Kakuta felt himself being pushed even deeper into the pneumatic chair.

“Four battle gliders behind us,” Deringhouse reported. “Defensive shield is online.”

A new com message. “They want us to stop and land,” Morozova translated.

The first hit shook the glider. Shortly afterwards, the shield absorbed shots two, three, and four.

“They have us in their sights,” Deringhouse said. “Two more gliders approaching at eight o’clock. This is getting too hot to handle, kids.”

“Get us out of here,” Sloane demanded.

Kakuta looked at her, confused. “And go where?”

“Anywhere,” he replied.

“Who do I take? Just you? What about the others?” He gestured at the pilots. “If we’re on the ground, the glider will quickly be out of range at this speed. Right? Deringhouse, how fast are we going?”

“1,500 kilometers an hour,” Deringhouse said. “A little over that.”

“Then I’d only have a few seconds!” Kakuta protested.

Morozova flew an evasive maneuver, briefly losing their pursuers. But the Topsidans soon adjusted to her flight patterns. Without a word, Sloane took control of the glider’s cannon. Kakuta couldn’t see if she landed a hit. He suspected the chances of success were low; the enemy gliders were technologically on even footing with theirs.

“Shield down.” Deringhouse sounded absent. “Four more gliders approaching from two o’clock.”

One hit; their glider dropped suddenly. Morozova recovered and brought it back up. Kakuta rested a hand on Sloane’s arm, then hesitated about which of the two pilots he should touch and (if need be) teleport out of the glider.

Deringhouse said, “Women and children first.”

Without turning her head, Morozova said, “Tako, if I feel your hand on my shoulder, I’ll bite it off.”

At that moment, blinding flashes streaked through the bottle-green rainscape. There was cracking, an explosion.

“What’s happening?” Sloane shouted.

Morozova remained calm. “The newly arrived gliders are shooting at our pursuers. The ones chasing us minimized or even disabled their shields. We were already beaten, after all. Easy prey for the new attackers.”

“Are we also under attack?” Immediately, Kakuta realized how nonsensical this question was.

“No,” said Deringhouse. “We’re just watching. The unknown cavalry’s cheering fans.”

“We won’t stay in the air much longer,” Morozova warned them.

Crackling and hissing came from the com unit, then the voice grew clearer. “Huuqer speaking. I’m a Ferron. Follow us!”

“Or?” Sloane asked quickly.

“No ‘or,’” the voice said before cutting the connection.

Morozova sighed. “Let’s fly after them. It’s terrible weather for an aerial fight anyway.”

2.

The Good Watchman

Myranar

Reginald Bull scrutinized the creature squatting on the floor in front of him. He wondered if this was the punishment for their (ultimately) failed escape attempt. Who knew how the Fantan's psychology worked? Maybe they had a hidden propensity for cruelty. *Abducted, fled, caught again, and dragged into this space station…and now this.*

The being looked about a meter tall and resembled a beaver (complete with beaver tail) that someone had stuck the head of a mouse or a rat onto. It was like one of the sliding puzzles that had been used to torment Bull in his less-than-glorious kindergarten days. Out of the creature's mouth stuck a single, prominent tooth, sharp and (when you looked closely) slightly sword-shaped.

"A vampire beaver," Bull murmured to Manoli. "A beaver mouse vampire."

Manoli nodded, but in a way that made it clear to Bull just how little regard he had for this biological hypothesis. The doctor was interested in something else.

"How does he speak our language?"

Bull coughed to clear his throat. With its shimmering silky coat, the creature looked like an animal, but the way it sat—legs crossed, simple sandals on its feet—gave it an entirely non-animalistic air.

It stood up. Bull saw that it was wearing a wide-cut pair of shorts that reached more than halfway down its thighs. Both pockets bulged. Its upper body was unclothed.

"So," said Manoli. "Gucky."

The creature gave a clumsy sort of bow and said, "Gucky and

Savior of the Universe. I'm afraid I must insist on that."

He's making fun of us, thought Bull.

"Gucky," said Gucky. "Maybe you'd be kind enough to introduce yourselves? Assuming members of your species have individual names. Otherwise, I'd be happy to assign you numbers. Number One," he said, pointing at Manoli. "Two, Three." He directed his finger towards Sue Mirafiore and Sid González. Then he cast a considering glance at Bull. "Eleven," he said. "I'll call you Eleven, friendo."

"You absolutely will *not,*" Bull said firmly. "And I am *not* your 'friendo.'"

"I hereby grant myself permission to call you that," the creature proclaimed grandly.

"I'm the one who'd have to give permission. Not you. Me."

"*Gucky,*" the creature reprimanded him. "It's *Gucky*, not 'Yoo-mee.'" He turned to Manoli. "Has Eleven always suffered from these kinds of pronunciation difficulties?"

"Why are you asking me?" Manoli raised his eyebrows. "Why not her?" He pointed at Mirafiore.

Gucky took a few steps toward the young mutant. His gait seemed both awkward, almost the waddling of a young child, and self-assured at the same time. Without hesitation, he reached for the girl's left arm, which ended in a stump.

"Hmm," he said.

Mirafiore didn't shake him off. He took her healthy, fully formed arm and held it up alongside the stump.

"I like you a lot," he announced.

"Thank you," said Sue. Her voice still sounded feeble.

On the whole, the therapy to counter the transition shocks had

been effective. Fulkar had done well.

The doctor who looked like a human but couldn't have been human. Still, she's not back to one hundred percent yet.

"Careful," Bull warned. "That alien could be dangerous."

The creature's solitary tooth gleamed. "*Could?* I consider this skeptical 'could' an insult. It's not that I *could* be dangerous. I *am* dangerous. Were it not beneath the dignity and sacred honor of a First-Class Besun, you would be in for a duel, Eleven."

"I'm game," said Bull. He raised his fists and tested them.

"If you're picking a weapon, I wouldn't go for the art of speaking," Manoli advised with a smirk. "Our new friend seems to have the gift of the gab."

Gucky made a self-deprecating gesture.

"Which leads us back to my question," Manoli continued. "How does a Besun from who-knows-where on a Fantan station speak English?"

"Well, so do you," said Gucky before looking at Bull with disdain. "More or less, anyway."

"If you want to hear my theory," Bull began, "this creature's not real. The Fantan have installed a hypnotic projector somewhere, and they're sucking the contents of our nightmares out of our heads and showing us our own fears. With a holo projector."

"A hypnotic holo dream extraction projector," Gucky corrected him. He sighed. "That was actually my first theory when I saw you people for the first time. However, the light of reason shines brightly within me, so I was forced to reach the conclusion that you might be real." He made his tooth flash again. Bull had no idea how.

Maybe, Bull considered, *there are bioluminescent bacteria in that tooth that he can switch on to distract his prey.*

“He’s a telepath,” Sue said. “He learned our language that way. Maybe he can’t even really speak it. He just takes the words he needs out of our heads.”

“Among your kind, the females are clearly more astute than the males,” Gucky praised her.

“While we’re on the subject,” Manoli said, “what kind of being are you?”

Gucky made an indeterminate gesture. “My enemies say the worst kind. I say one of a kind. I’m an Ilt.”

Sid González had been watching this scene from the sidelines. Quietly, he cleared his throat. “If Sue’s right, we’re dealing with a pretty smart dude.” He grinned at Gucky. “I sure couldn’t do that.” He tapped his head. “Pick up a language just by reading people’s thoughts?”

“It’s all a test,” Bull said. “Or a public performance. Fantan all over the station are probably sitting in front of their holo-screens and gawking at us for their entertainment.”

“If so, these Fantan have good taste,” said Gucky, nodding in a human-like gesture that he might have also learned from their thoughts. “You see that in their choice of Besun.” He cast a glance at Bull. “Excepting a *few* offenses, of course.”

“He’s trying to provoke you,” said Manoli loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

Bull nodded slowly.

“He wants to play,” Sue suggested.

“Sure, and he picked a great place for fun and games,” Bull snapped back, making a show of looking around the room.

The room—or hall, maybe—was shaped like a half-oval. The door they had entered through was exactly in the middle of the straight side, which was seven or eight meters long. On the opposite side, which curved outwards, there were three more closed doors

spaced at regular intervals.

As far as Bull could see, the room was unfurnished. The entire ceiling, at least four meters high and gently arching upwards, shone with a subdued light. Just where the curved part of the wall met the straight edge, there was a depression in the floor, perhaps this Gucky creature's sleeping hollow.

A few tubs stood in the room with sad-looking plants growing from them. Scrawny, bare, blood-red things.

Gucky had noticed Bull looking around the room. "Mi casa es su casa," he said.

"He even speaks Spanish!" González sounded thrilled.

"Yeah, he's totally amazing," Bull snarled. "The best of the Besun."

Bull crossed the room to the convex wall. With a look over his shoulder, he noticed that the straight wall didn't connect with the ceiling. Not far from the wall, the ceiling rose up at a steep angle, opening up a gap more than two meters high. The surface was glazed, forming a window as long as the whole room. Behind the glass, Bull could see some Fantan. They looked extremely focused.

"We're in a peep show," said Bull. "A theater. Besun theater for the Fantan." *And other aliens, maybe. Who knows who else is on the station?*

As Manoli and the two young people turned around to look at the glass-fronted gallery, Bull kept walking towards the doors. Only when he was up close did he see the narrow waist-high strips the exact same color as the wall they were embedded into. On these recessed strips were slightly raised points sorted into fingernail-sized groups. It looked like braille.

Bull extended his hand towards them but swung around to the doors instead. One after another, he opened all three doors in the back wall. They each led into narrow rooms, four to five meters deep, with floors that visibly sank downwards towards the back.

The last quarter of the floor was a handspan under water. The water smelled unnatural, disinfected.

The hygiene rooms, Bull assumed. *Maybe split by gender: men, women, Gucky.*

Even though he wasn't totally clear on how these toilets operated, a feeling of relief swept over him. At least they could be undisturbed in these cabins. They'd have privacy. Assuming there were no surveillance devices installed inside.

"Where are we supposed to sleep?" Bull asked loudly into the room after finishing his inspection.

Gucky wandered over to his sleeping pit, laboriously arranged his blankets, and said, "Interesting question."

Suddenly, a buzzing sound rang out. In various spots across the room, the floor sank to reveal new hollows. Four of them, Bull counted.

"We still need covers," he complained, loudly enough that their hosts surely heard him.

Gucky got up with exaggerated grumbling. Bull noticed that he was now speaking a different, entirely alien language. The Ilt touched one of the collections of raised bumps between the doors.

Evidently, these were sensor keys. A rectangular segment appeared in the wall and twin doors slid apart. In the opening behind them, Bull could see quite a number of blankets or textiles meant for other purposes.

The Ilt threw one of these blankets to Sue, then one to Sid. Finally, he helped out Manoli too. Then he painstakingly looked through the pile again, made a regretful gesture, and said, "What a shame. The blanket for Number Eleven has gone missing. Maybe it was Besun. Be careful. There are thieves romping around on the *Myranar*."

Bull sighed in resignation, then went over to the wall and touched one of the sensor buttons himself. A deafeningly shrill,

rhythmic clanging sound rang out as if someone were slicing panes of glass with a chainsaw.

Bull stepped back, stared at the strip, and pressed the same button again. Silence.

He took a breath. “Was that an alarm?” he asked Gucky.

The Ilt looked flabbergasted. “An alarm? That wasn’t an alarm. It was music. The Fantan—some of them, at least—love music.”

“Clearly,” said Bull. He made a show of massaging his chest. “They probably love the cardiac arrhythmia caused by long-term exposure to *that*.”

“Providing they have hearts,” Manoli interjected.

Bull extended his hand and touched the next button. This time, the closet segment opened up in the wall again. He took two blankets out at random. They felt soft, almost weightless, but they immediately warmed his hands as if the material itself was radiating heat.

“Number Eleven is pretty talented,” Gucky said approvingly.

“Number Eleven is called Bull, by the way,” the astronaut said. “*Mr.* Bull to you.”

The Ilt nodded. Bull introduced his companions while he arranged his sleeping hollow.

“Can you tell us how we get food?”

“Of course,” the Ilt replied.

Bull stared at him for a while.

“Oh,” the Ilt said at last. “Mr. Eleven didn’t just want to know if I *can* but was also trying to politely request that I *do*.”

“Please,” Bull said. “If you can find a little time between now and the death of the universe, it would be much appreciated.”

The Ilt waddled over to the wall and pressed another sensor button. This time, a narrow chest emerged from the wall. He opened the chest's lid, rummaged around inside, then closed it again. "This'll take a while," he said.

Close to fifteen minutes later, they took some bowls (or perhaps big, bulbous cups) out of the chest. In these receptacles sloshed a thick, almost gelatinous red broth, a mixture of chili con carne and Jell-O. At the side of each bowl, affixed with a magnet, hung a finger-wide metal suction tube.

Bull gingerly dipped his fingertips into the sauce and licked them clean. He raised his eyebrows approvingly, then he pulled off the tube and began to eat with it. The others followed his example.

The soup was spicy, but not too spicy, sweet and a little like bitter orange. He was full before he had even emptied the bowl, but he devoured the rest anyway.

The Ilt had kept himself to one side. "Aren't you going to eat?" Sue called to him at last. She held out her half-full bowl to him. "You want some?"

Gucky came over, took the dish out of Sue's hand, and brought the suction tube to his mouth. "Thank you," he said, then ate.

The light suddenly grew dimmer.

"We should sleep," Manoli advised.

"Already?" Bull said in wonder. He started to walk back and forth restlessly. "We've been fed, but they haven't cleaned our teeth yet. No one's read us a goodnight story either. Our owners aren't going to neglect us, are they?"

"You don't really like the Fantan, do you, Mr. Eleven?" Gucky asked. Bull heard the Ilt snuggling up in his softly rustling blanket.

"I don't make a good pet," Bull said.

"Who knows?" Gucky murmured, speaking loudly enough for anyone who wanted to hear. "Maybe those Fantan up there have a

different opinion."

Bull couldn't hold back the impulse to take two, three threatening steps towards the Ilt's sleeping hollow. He didn't get any farther. He felt himself losing contact with the floor.

Instinctively, Bull grasped around with his arms, but he found no purchase in the air. *Telekinesis,* he thought. Out of nowhere, the Ilt was standing in the middle of the room. How could the creature have moved so quickly? He had stretched his arms out now and was *conducting* Bull's flight.

Floating didn't cause Bull any alarm. He'd been through strenuous astronaut training. Still, the Ilt's high-handed attack irritated him.

"Let me go!" he demanded.

He felt invisible forces turning him upside-down and carrying him up to the ceiling.

"Come again?" the Ilt asked.

"I said, let me go," Bull repeated, stretching his arms downwards as a protective measure. He was well trained, but falling on his head from this height could have serious consequences.

The telekinetic grip loosened; Bull slid downwards, then felt himself being gripped again. He flew in somersaults, went along the whole length of the room, turned on his own axis, and was left hanging upside-down in the middle of the room. He crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"Well? Now what?" he asked with a yawn.

Gucky made him float downwards. Bull reached out and briefly did a handstand, then fully stretched out his body and jumped to his feet.

A moment later, the Ilt was sitting by the wall, his head slightly inclined. He looked exhausted.

Bull sat down a few meters away from him. “The Fantan must get a lot of entertainment out of you, Master of the Universe.”

“*Savior*,” the Ilt corrected. “Just plain old *Savior*. Not *Master*.”

There was a pause that sounded like a ceasefire. Bull nodded to Manoli and closed his eyes. He pondered what might be going through Sue’s and Sid’s heads. Billions of kilometers from home, cooped up in a giant metal shell that was built, inhabited, and operated by beings that came from a totally different evolutionary background than humanity. He, Sid, Sue, and Eric had more in common with a giraffe, a great white shark, or a peanut than with the Fantan.

On the other hand, the Fantan made an altogether more personable impression than most great white sharks, and a more intelligent one than peanuts. He tried to imagine what their native habitat was like. Their cities and technology. Their works of art. *Their alarm music.*

What had their first contact with the Arkonides been like? Which Thora, which Crest had they encountered? What misunderstandings had they needed to overcome? What basis for negotiations had been found?

Bull could picture the book of world history as he knew it being shrunken down to a brief chapter. To a footnote in cosmic history.

When he opened his eyes again, the glass-covered gallery had been darkened. Bull didn’t know if the glass—or whatever transparent material the Fantan used—had been darkened or if they’d just turned out the lights in the room beyond the window.

He lay down in his sleeping pit. His tiredness weighed on him like increased gravity. He didn’t fight it. He didn’t feel like he was in danger. Quite the opposite. He and his companions were being kept safe by the Fantan. And why not? They were precious Besun, after all.

He heard Manoli and Sid breathing deeply and Sue lightly snoring. He grinned, then rolled over onto his stomach and rested

his head on his forearm.

His thoughts were drifting in the no-man's land between dreaming and waking when he felt a touch on his back. He wiped the spot with his hand a couple of times. There was nothing there. Still, the sensation remained.

He shook off all his tiredness. It felt as though a single finger was running along his back and clumsily trying to draw something. Despite the touch's spectral nature, Bull worked to make out a meaning behind it.

Letters, he finally realized. The illusory finger was writing letters.

Bull read: *You understand. Don't speak. Think.*

Okay, Bull thought, focusing hard. *Who are you?* As soon as he asked, he realized how stupid the question was. He already knew who was capable of such disembodied dexterity. *Gucky.*

Yes.

For a moment, he thought the Ilt was doing it just to mess with him. *What do you want, man?*

So we're "man" and "dude" and "friendo" after all, Gucky wrote.

Bull nodded imperceptibly. He felt more letters. They became more fluid, more self-assured. *I can't escape on my own. Your presence changes everything. Shall we work together, Reginald Eleven?*

He nodded again.

Let's make the Fantan think you and I are arguing.

Agreed, Bull thought. He couldn't hold back a grin. *Are you writing to the others too? Eric? Or Sue and Sid?*

They're asleep, Gucky wrote.

I was almost asleep too.

You're the one who keeps watch. Watch over me too.

A wave of sympathy for the Ilt swept over him. At least he, Bull, was not alone. He was with three other members of his species. From the look of things, Gucky had spent his time as Besun alone in this room, this hall. He could well be the only Ilt on the station.

All right, he thought. *I'll keep watch over you too.*

Good, wrote the finger, then withdrew.

Bull waited another few minutes. Then he turned over onto his back, folded his arms under his neck, and stared into the darkness. When he finally fell asleep, he dreamed he was sitting on an icy hill. In front of him, the flames of a great fire blazed. The night sky was cloudless. The ribbon of the Milky Way had moved much nearer; a few stars seemed so close he could reach out and touch them.

He didn't have to turn around to know that *his people* were lying in the cave, asleep. They should sleep. He would keep watch. For eternity, if need be.

He wouldn't sleep.

He was a good watchman.

3.

“I have been gone for eons…”

In the Vega System

Ellert

It was cold in the hall. Rhodan could see his breath as a cloud in the air. It descended like a translucent layer, separating him from the man smiling back at them. The desert fort on Rofus, the encounter with the Topsidans, their escape through the transmitter…it was all behind them, cut off from the current moment as if by a scalpel.

Only Ellert was there. Ellert, who had died in the Gobi Desert when he had been caught in the energy shield when it came online again.

Had they reached Lannol, the place where the distress call had originated? Had they been followed?

No. By now, the two Ferrons had deactivated the transmitter.

Rhodan had *switched over*.

With no further hesitation, he went to the man sitting on a folding stool a few meters ahead of them, close to the wall, still smiling.

“Hello, Mr. Ellert,” Rhodan said, extending his hand. “Forgive me if I’m a little surprised to see you here.”

The man stood and gave a slight bow. He ignored the hand, however. “Did you do what I asked?”

“Yes,” Rhodan replied, withdrawing his hand. “I didn’t leave you in the tunnel under the Gobi. But none of our doctors, not even the Arkonide diagnostic machines, could tell me if you were dead or alive. Apparently…” Rhodan recalled the words. “Your condition

defied any concept of life or death."

"Interesting," Ellert said. He thoughtfully combed his mustache with the three middle fingers of his left hand.

"Life or death. Maybe you could give me a clue there?"

By this point, Ras Tschubai, Wuriu Sengu, Thora, and the two Ferrons, Chaktor and Lossoshér, had all left the transmitter.

Rhodan felt the tension from before he'd entered the transmitter draining from him.

From before I dematerialized.

Ernst Ellert asked, "How was your trip?"

Rhodan smirked. "Short and good."

So he assumed, anyway. He actually had no memory at all of the transmission process itself, which had occurred via a medium that was definitely not of Ferron construction. He tried to recall, but it was a pointless endeavor. All he'd been left with was the vague feeling of having forgotten something. Even that had to be an illusion; every part of him had dematerialized, including his senses. His eyes, his ears, his brain. His entire self. In that phase of the transmission, what had he been?

Maybe, he thought, his own condition in that immeasurable moment had also "defied any concept of life or death." Was that why Ellert had asked about his trip?

"And you?" Rhodan asked. "How did you get here?" *Wherever "here" is,* he thought. *Is this Lannol?*

The largely barren room, a hall about twenty meters on each side and ten meters tall, gave no meaningful indications.

Intuitively, Rhodan excluded the possibility that they were on Earth.

Tschubai and Wuriu kept themselves a few steps back. Chaktor

and Lossoshér had both stayed by the transmitter without a word to each other. They were no doubt observing the conversation between Rhodan and Ellert. Rhodan couldn't rule out the possibility that Ellert's presence had shocked the two Ferrons. They had believed the transmitter to represent the secret heart of their transport system. Now, at their destination, there was not a Ferron awaiting them but a man like Rhodan, of all things.

"Introduce me to this man," said Thora.

Ellert regarded the Arkonide in silence.

"His name's Ernst Ellert," Rhodan replied. "In the Gobi Desert, he managed to bore a tunnel right up to the defensive shield around the *Stardust*. We met each other there. I watched Ellert die there. Didn't I?"

Ellert smiled in agreement.

The shield should have burned him to a cinder. Instead, it had put his body into a strange, torpid state that resembled hibernation. And had set Ellert's spirit free.

Thora glanced from Rhodan to Ellert. Rhodan expected her to greet this absurd tale with one of her sardonic remarks. That she'd give him another taste of her superior intellect. Instead, she turned and walked back over to the transmitter. Rhodan watched her for a moment, stunned.

Then he introduced Ras Tschubai and Wuriu Sengu. The latter and Ellert bowed to each other. Rhodan had the fleeting feeling of witnessing a ceremony for an eccentric secret society. Witnessing and being excluded from it.

Tschubai asked, "Ellert, are you some kind of spirit?"

Ellert visibly gave this some thought, but he didn't reply. Rhodan used this time to give him a closer look. Ellert was dressed exactly as Rhodan remembered: in vaguely European clothing, only partly suitable for digging work in the Gobi. Here and there, his jacket and pants were both stained with desert dust.

At the same time, the man looked indefinable, even abstract. *An apparition,* Rhodan thought, giving credence to Tschubai's question. *But that's ridiculous.* Or would his hand go right through Ellert's if he tried to grasp it? Like a phantom?

Ellert made a slightly defensive gesture.

Rhodan said, "Ellert, or whoever, *whatever* you are, you have to give me something if I'm supposed to trust you. Otherwise it's hard to see why I should waste my time on you. What can you tell me?"

Ellert took a couple of steps to the side. Rhodan felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end when he noticed that Ellert wasn't really walking on solid ground. It was as if his body had shifted in space without taking up space itself. Unfathomable, almost impossible to grasp with the senses. It was a demonstration of the esoteric nature of his form.

"Ellert," Rhodan insisted, "you have to give me something."

"Didn't I tell you we'd see each other again?"

"You said something like, 'See you later.'"

"Yeah." He smiled again. "I was right."

"I'm sure you're a great fortune teller," Rhodan joked. "But I don't need a fortune teller."

"Are you sure?"

Rhodan couldn't help laughing. "If you put it that way, who *couldn't* use a fortune teller? But how does it always go? 'The future is shrouded in darkness'?"

Ellert looked at Rhodan with an indefinable expression. "If you believe in time."

"Uh-huh. Is that an old false doctrine that you've moved past?"

"You have a penchant for mockery, don't you?" Ellert decided. He moved his right hand as if stroking a globe. Then Rhodan

thought he could see the globe before his very eyes: a translucent, pale blue, completely smooth representation of Earth. But was he actually seeing it? He squinted.

"We are like wanderers on the surface of a sphere," said Ellert. "The wanderer believes there's a forward and backward, a goal and an origin. But if you remove the wanderer, you see that nothing about that is a given law of the sphere. All of that"—he tapped his forehead—"is just a figment of the imagination."

"I can't say I know you that well," Rhodan said, "but that analogy doesn't sound like Ellert."

For a moment, Ellert looked confused. "That's possible," he admitted. "You're right. The wanderer metaphor doesn't come from me."

"Where does it come from?"

Ellert combed three fingers through his mustache again. "I was on a journey," he said. Rhodan could see his gaze turning inward. "I was aware that the energy shield would hit me. I'd seen it in my white dreams."

Rhodan raised his eyebrows. *White dreams.* Hadn't he, Rhodan, also had something like a "white vision" in a moment of deep dejection? A dream of a city where humanity would overcome all its inherited restrictions and marginalization? A city that would also serve as the starport from which humanity would advance into space?

"Ellert," he said slowly. "Did you manipulate me? Did you feed me the dream of a new city?"

"You could just as well ask, did I dream your dream? Or did you dream mine? Or did we both dream the dream of all humanity? Such questions only make sense for the wanderer on the sphere."

Rhodan glanced over at Tschubai and Wuriu, to Thora and the two Ferrons. There was a kind of undertow coming from Ellert. Something that threatened to sweep him along with it. *He's*

dangerous, Rhodan thought. *Whoever he was, he's turned into something dangerous.*

He remembered seeing great fear on Ellert's face that day underground in the Gobi.

"You knew the shield was going to kill you. You were afraid of that. Why did you still let it happen?" *Like talking to a dead person about his own death,* he thought, nodding to the apparition.

"Afraid? Yes, I remember that feeling. I also remember the Lì Zou." He noticed Rhodan's questioning gaze. "Our Chinese digging machine. The shield, the intrusion of all these energies into my consciousness—it acted like a burning lens. It took me and concentrated me, then reflected me on another side. Whatever I thought, whatever I was, it was ripped out of reality and decanted, somewhere, sometime." He gave them a pained smile. "I can't explain it to you. There is no way to explain it. I..."

Rhodan gave him time.

"You know that for a photon moving at light speed, no time passes. It doesn't take any time for it to get from one place to another. So it's in every possible place all at the same time. That's the sense of timelessness."

"You turned into a photon?" Rhodan asked dubiously. "A photonic consciousness?"

"Excuse the simplified analogy. I wasn't just *everywhere*. I was also *at every time.* And in all possible realities."

"I'm struggling to imagine it," Rhodan admitted.

"Then forget about it," Ellert said. The words sounded aloof, almost dismissive.

Rhodan decided to respect the distance that lay between them. The distance between him, Rhodan the human, and *that*, Ellert, who had become something else.

"What did you see, Ellert?"

“Everything.” He sounded tired. “I’ve been waiting here for you. Always. Long before I set out from Munich to the Gobi, I was sitting here and waiting for you, Rhodan. I saw you again in the Gobi. A very special reunion. Back then, our true encounters had still been far in the future, of course.”

He lowered his voice until it was no more than a faint whisper. Nonetheless, Rhodan had no trouble understanding him.

“We’ve encountered each other in worlds you wouldn’t believe me about if I told you. In solar systems that aren’t even part of this universe, in space-times like embers, in time periods that exalted engineers built to destroy the Earth—dark engineers of the multiverse. I have taken up residence in transfused time towers, in shafts reaching so far back in time that the big bang was nothing but an endlessly distant, unobtainable promise. Do you think I’m talking crazy, Mr. Rhodan?”

“Are you?”

Rhodan could see Ellert’s face growing ever paler, ever more translucent. His lips no longer moved as he spoke.

“I don’t know. Sometimes I think talking crazy is the last truth that remains to us when we’ve wandered across the borderless sphere again and again and grasped that this sphere is nothing but our own unfulfillable dream of ourselves. When we’ve grasped that every step must lead into madness. That the madness is our only home. Are you listening to me?”

“Yes,” Rhodan replied. “Very closely. Why did you wait here for me? Clearly there are an endless number of other places we’ve met. Or that we will meet.”

“The Vega system,” said Ellert.

“So we’re still in the Vega system?”

“*You’re* in the Vega system. *I* have been gone for eons.”

Rhodan didn’t have to look around to feel how much distance the conversation with Ellert was putting between him and the

others present. In a paradoxical way, the unreality of the scene made it easier for him to believe Ellert. Didn't he need something like a fortune teller after all?

He gestured to Tschubai, Wuriu, and Thora, and asked Ellert, "How can we get back to Earth? We and the rest of our team?"

"Easily," Ellert said. "Relatively easily, anyway."

"Show us the way."

"Are you sure that's the destination you desire?"

"Of course I'm sure. I want to bring my people home."

"And the Ferrons?" Ellert asked. His face was losing ever more of its presence, drifting ever farther away.

"The Ferrons?" Rhodan asked. "I don't know. They're far more technologically advanced than we are."

"They can't stand up to the Topsidans," Ellert warned him.

"And we can? We have nothing. As good as nothing, anyway. Nothing that could remotely match the Topsidian fleet."

"And if the next Topsidian fleet invades another solar system? If it invades the Sol system?"

"It won't necessarily come to that."

"But the possibility exists. And there is at least one future in which this possibility will have become a reality."

"You've seen it?"

"I have," Ellert whispered. His voice gradually lost all its humanity. There were tones like sheer nature: wind blowing, rain lashing.

Rhodan stepped closer to him without touching him. "Will humanity survive this future?"

“No.”

Rhodan gulped. Why couldn’t he find it in himself to doubt Ellert’s words? Why did he trust this apparition? “What should I do?”

“Do what you want.”

“And what do I want to do?”

“You found something on the Moon that all humans have sought. The Arkonides are searching too. Don’t go back; go ahead of them. Recognize what you are seeking in the Vega system. Find it.”

Rhodan slowly shook his head. “I can’t win against the Topsidans. I’d need resources I don’t have. Military forces. Arkonide ships.”

“It’s a question of which future you want,” he heard out of the silence, Ellert’s voice now no more than the quiet gurgling of a brook. A waft of air. His face seemed transfigured, bright, turned away from all present. Rhodan heard something like, “The Ferrons and the Terrans are bound. If you leave the Vega system now and return to Earth, you’ll lose the Earth. Stay and keep watch.”

“What for?” Rhodan called.

One last breeze and Ellert was gone.

Wuriu pulled a few strands of his spiky hair into shape.

Tschubai cast a questioning glance at Rhodan. “I couldn’t understand him very well at the end,” he said. He stood tall and athletic in the room, as if he were in control of the situation, and seemed relieved that Ellert was gone. “Is there anything I should know about this apparition? Or that Wuriu should know?”

“Give me a little time,” Rhodan said.

Tschubai nodded. “Of course.”

Thora fixed her gaze on Rhodan but didn’t say a word. He

noticed a light film of moisture on her eyes. Something in the conversation must have greatly moved the Arkonide on an emotional level. *I'll have to talk to her about Ellert*, he decided.

"The device worked perfectly," Lossoshér announced, as if anyone had been questioning that.

"Where are we?" Rhodan asked the guardian. "Have you been able to determine our location?"

"No," replied the old Ferron, who looked too lean and too tall for his species. His copper-colored hair coordinated well with his sea blue skin. He drew his shoulders in, shivering. "It's cold here," he complained, as if Rhodan were personally responsible for the palpable chill of the arrival hall.

Chaktor laughed a full and booming laugh. With his height of barely over one and a half meters and his visibly robust physique, the compact man was a prime example of a Ferron. You could imagine his picture in a stellar ethnology course. "It really is cold."

How the coldness caused all this mirth remained a mystery to Rhodan. It was as if everyone was relieved to have found a discussion topic other than Ellert.

"Welcome!" a voice called out suddenly.

Rhodan whipped around. The man walking towards them had entered the hall unnoticed.

We have to pay more attention, Rhodan thought. *This is unknown territory.* He watched, tense, as the man came closer.

He didn't appear to present any danger. He was old and held his arms somewhat raised. Unadulterated joy tinged his voice, which sounded alarmingly weak, almost disembodied. In strangely accented but clearly enunciated Arkonide, he said, "I knew you wouldn't leave us in the lurch."

4.

Giants

Pigell

The landing was difficult. Beads of sweat formed on Morozova's temples and slowly ran down her face. Kakuta was still maintaining physical contact with Sloane; he had rested his other hand on Deringhouse. If need be, he'd jump out of the glider, taking both of them.

Morozova followed the maneuvers of the glider flying ahead of them. They went in ever tighter downward spirals, darting and dodging their way through the interwoven branches of the treetops. The Ferron pilot clearly knew their way around this labyrinth and forged a path with their craft, but even that wasn't without obstructions. Kakuta heard grinding and brushing, the cracking and snapping of branches. Now and again, an animal gave a shrill, sharp shriek, then another that was more doleful.

It grew ever darker. Another curve, then another. Their glider practically corkscrewed into the sphere beneath the treetops.

Suddenly, the glider dropped as if in freefall. Morozova struggled to even it out before their landing.

They landed hard. The safety braces held them tight, the pneumatic seats softening the impact.

They stood up, opened the door, and took a look at Pigell.

"Isn't it supposed to be day on this side of the planet?" Deringhouse asked.

Pigell was only about five hundred kilometers from Vega, and Vega was an enormous star, fifty times the size of Earth's sun and far brighter. The sky should have been flooded with light. Instead, a diffuse darkness surrounded them, a gray-green twilight like a late

fall afternoon on Earth.

At the same time, it was anything but cool; Kakuta estimated the temperature to be over forty degrees Celsius, maybe even fifty. The heat made him drowsy. The gravity, lower than on Ferrol but still a fifth higher than on Earth, made every step an arduous chore. He felt as though his body were filled with ballast.

He could hear rain pouring, but it was a distant noise. Not a single drop reached the ground. The humidity had to be extremely high.

They had landed less than ten meters from the Ferrons' glider. Their door was already open, and a few Ferrons had gotten out. Kakuta cast only a brief glance at them. At the edge of the clearing, something was moving. Something enormous yet shapeless. At least, he couldn't make out any specific outline. The thing sliding by the tree trunks, rubbing against them or squeezing through two trees packed tightly together, looked like an inflated elephant. Kakuta was pretty sure he could hear slurping sounds.

"Our rescuers," said Deringhouse.

The Ferrons came over to them. Their leader was a short, broad-shouldered man wearing a blue-black, metallic-looking uniform and a head covering that resembled a medieval knight's helm. The visor was open. He stopped a few meters from them and surveyed them one after another.

"I am Huuqer. It's possible that the Topsidans have already sent out a second wave to look for you. You'll shortly be taken to the Citadel. He's waiting for you there. Please have patience for now. We're trying to draw the Topsidans away from here."

"Who's waiting?" Sloane asked pointedly.

"The Thort," Huuqer replied, almost startled.

The Thort, Kakuta thought. Wasn't that an incredible punchline? The goal of their search had deigned to come pick them up.

The Ferron turned around again and hurried back to his glider.

Other than one woman, his whole group followed him. Two of them split off and headed for the craft in which Kakuta and the others had fled the carrier. The Ferrons climbed into the glider.

"Wait!" Sloane cried. She ran to the glider and got inside. Right afterwards, she reappeared with her crossed arms full of packages and boxes.

The door closed behind her. Moments later, both vehicles rose up through the closed treetop canopy.

Sloane distributed the provisions she'd retrieved from the glider. "We'll have no shortage of water," she said.

The Ferron who had stayed behind had not yet said a word. Instead, she had kept a short distance away from them. The idea ran through Kakuta's head that the other Ferrons had simply forgotten her. That was the forlorn impression she gave.

He walked over to her and said, "My name is Tako Kakuta. We haven't thanked you for saving us yet. Thanks, Ms..."

"I'm Bechia Yuaad," she replied in a soft, faint voice. She was then silent, out of respect, it seemed to him. "You don't have to thank me. We're hoping that in you, we have saved ourselves."

It sounded like a ceremonial truism. Neither Kakuta nor the others replied to it.

Sloane introduced herself, Morozova, and the two men, and said, "What do we do now?"

"We wait," the Ferron replied.

"Excellent strategy."

"Do you have a better idea?" Kakuta asked, then thought, *Why am I defending this Ferron?*

"And how long do we wait?" Sloane responded.

"Not long," Yuaad said. "The Ferrhians are coming, but they're

not here yet."

"Uh-huh," Sloane replied, twisting her lips ironically.

They all fell silent for a few minutes. Kakuta took the opportunity to get a better look at the Ferron. She looked sturdy, even though she was more diminutive than the others. Her skin was a shade of blue that seemed to glow in the dim light. A kind of light blue glaze. She hadn't put much effort into her hair...unless she had actually worked hard to make her copper-colored locks look unkempt.

Suddenly, as he looked into her almost see-through green eyes, he realized that she was scrutinizing him as thoroughly as he was her, as if the two of them had to learn each other by heart. He tried to make his face unreadable.

"Who are the Ferrhians?" asked Sloane.

"They have been here for a long time," Yuaad replied. "They were among the first."

Sloane waved a hand dismissively.

The Ferron released her gaze from Kakuta's face. Addressing no one in particular, she announced, "I'm going over to the giant for a few moments."

She started heading over to the clearing's edge, where Kakuta had seen the formless entity. He noticed her limping and had a few thoughts about this impairment. She briefly looked back over her shoulder at him. Without a second thought, he followed her.

The thing loomed like a wall with slow ripples running through it. It was a colossus of an animal, four—no, five meters tall. Huge lappets hung down its sides like heavy blankets. Kakuta couldn't tell which part of it was the front and which was the back. The slurping sound never ended.

He hadn't said anything, and the Ferron had so far given no indication that she was aware of his presence. Now, though, she said, "Beautiful, isn't it?"

“What is it?”

“We call them the giants. The giants of Pigell. The Ferrhians have another name for them, and they make a big mystery out of it, as always.”

“Giants,” Kakuta repeated. “A pretty appropriate name.”

Her laugh sounded surprisingly rough and dark. “They love drinking the rainfall. The rain that runs from the treetops and down the trunks. There are times of year when they live in the sea. That’s where they mate. In the rainy months, they’re on land, where they roam the jungle and fill their stomachs, taking substances from the wood for their flank hangings. Are you a biologist?”

“No,” he replied.

“That’s a shame,” she said before laughing darkly again. “Then I expect you’d like the Ferrhians better.”

“The ones who’ll be coming but we don’t know when.”

At last she turned to him. “They’re coming now. They’re already descending.” She looked at him, puzzled. “Can’t you hear them?”

Five of them came; they had wings. Until the last moment, Kakuta assumed the wings had to be technological in nature. He was mistaken.

The Ferrhians were noticeably shorter than the Ferrons, only 1.3 or 1.4 meters tall. Making up for it, their shoulders were broader and forked in a way that was tough to make sense of. The arms grew out of the frontmost part of the shoulder—thin, almost fragile limbs. From the rear side, literally bulging with muscle, grew the wings.

They weren’t covered with feathers, but with skin, and were long enough to touch the ground when folded closed, and to rise up behind their heads like wide collars.

On their backs, surrounded on each side by the wings, each

Ferrhian bore a birdcage-like structure made of bast or wood. Their faces looked shrunken somehow. They each wore two belts crossed over their chests with leather bags hanging from them. The pant legs were tucked into footwear halfway between boots and moccasins. At their sides, they carried long knives, perhaps machetes.

One of them, the shortest, took a step forward and said, “Our assignment is to bring you to the Citadel. Mount, mount.” He looked around at one face after another before his gaze rested on Kakuta. “My mother called me Douboloz.”

“He has chosen you,” Yuaad whispered to him. “Tell him your name. Then you can get into his carrying frame.”

Kakuta cleared his throat and said, “My mother called me Tako.”

He noticed Anne Sloane rolling her eyes before she walked over to one of the other Ferrhians and, after a brief exchange of words that Kakuta couldn’t make out, climbed into that one’s frame.

Kakuta mounted as well. The frame was a mixture of basket and dishware. He could slide his feet into pedals of a sort. There were grips for his hands. The open mesh could be closed over the back; the two parts held tight to each other with burrs that were visibly organic in nature.

The launch was quite an effort for all five Ferrhians. They ran, beating their wings, groaning with the strain. Then, finally, flap by flap, they raised themselves into the air. They sought and found their way through treetops; the descending gliders had left traces behind that literally showed the way.

When the jungle canopy was ten, then twenty meters below them, and above them was the bleak, cloudy sky—a deep blue shell lit only distantly by the glow of Vega—an exhilaration overcame Kakuta that he’d never felt before. It was like he was in an old fairy tale. He was a legendary figure who had been lifted up out of the human world, enchanted by who knew what magician and for what purpose.

I'm riding Yatagarasu, the envoy of the divine kami! he thought. He swiveled his head until he could see Bechia Yuaad. He laughed, and she laughed back, her teeth bright in the oval of her dark red lips.

After more than an hour's flight, the Ferrhians spread their wings wide and stopped beating them. Below, Kakuta spotted a wide river, the banks covered with white sand. There, they touched down by the water.

Douboloz had him get out. "The Citadel can't be reached directly by air," the Ferrhian explained. "It's surrounded by clusters of Aouziz. They would allow us to fly over, as they know of our bitter taste, but our cargo, our cargo is alive, and so they would attack you and your people."

Kakuta didn't know what "Aouziz" were, but he planned to ask Bechia Yuaad when he had a chance.

It was a struggle to walk across the sand. His shoes sank in and grew heavier. He was happier when they reached the harder ground of the jungle. Douboloz and the other Ferrhians drew their machetes. They wielded the long knives like extensions of their forearms, cutting branches from the trees.

For an hour or more, they trekked through the jungle. Then the river blocked their path. The Ferrhians showed how to use the sticks to wade through the river, sticking them into the ground and finding purchase between the rocks to withstand the current. They took off their shoes and socks, sticking the latter inside the former and tying the shoes together to hang them around their necks.

The river was wide, the water waist high and astonishingly cold. On the other side, they made a fire to dry themselves. The Ferrhians warned them not to put their soaked pants too close to the flames. The threads would turn brittle and the seams would break.

When their clothes were dry, they walked on. The Ferrhians found a brook that ran into the river and followed it upstream.

Suddenly, they saw a ray of sunlight. It fell on a wide stretch of

the brook's shore like a sharply-cut pillar of light shining through a gap in the thick green canopy. Kakuta almost jumped in surprise at the rainbow splendor of the sunlit bank; there had to be thousands of flowers blooming in gold, blue, turquoise, red, and orange. A multicolored sea.

Douboloz went straight through it. The blooms scattered and fluttered; they weren't flowers, but a kind of butterfly that danced around the Ferrhian and completely encompassed him, leaving only his slowly striding silhouette. The whirlwind of beauty left Kakuta holding his breath.

The Ferrhians followed the brook a while longer before turning off into the jungle. They put their machetes away again; these lower reaches of the jungle had no thick undergrowth. It was too dark. However, the ground was covered in moss and lichen and fungi. Here and there, an old tree lay diagonally over their path, a behemoth fallen from age, its trunk eight meters or more in diameter. They walked around these, not only because they were hard to climb over, but because animals, many of them poisonous, nested or lay in wait in their rotten wood and in hollows under the bark.

"In case we lose each other," Doublouz said, "in case the Topsidans detect us and we have to flee in separate directions, don't wait for help. Waiting for help in the jungle means certain death. Use the water to orient yourself. You can see and hear the water. Go to it. A trickle leads to a brook. A brook leads to a river. Where the river is, Ferrhians live. Or Ferrons."

Yuaad said, "We don't lose each other."

All around them was buzzing, flapping, rustling. Snake-like animals slithered past them; every so often, Kakuta felt their touch. A drawn-out, oscillating whistle often resounded from high up in the boughs.

Shortly after that, they were bombarded with large, mushy fruits similar to pale blue pumpkins. When the fruits crashed onto the ground, they burst open and released an infernal stench. Once, Darya Morozova, who was walking a few meters ahead of Kakuta,

was hit in the shoulder. She swore in Russian and tried to wipe off the tough, sticky substance, but she soon had it on her fingers too.

Kakuta let himself fall behind slightly. When the whistle sounded, he peered upward but didn't see anything.

"Chindrutes," Yuaad informed him. "Stink ghosts."

Kakuta laughed involuntarily. He heard a rustling, first quiet, then louder and louder. It soon became a crashing and thundering without end, as if they were walking through a smithy worked by enormous people.

Suddenly, the land dropped out below them. They were looking into a gorge. Below them flowed a river fed by a narrow but deep waterfall. They found a place to climb down, composed of smooth, wet rock. They grasped and held on tightly to protruding roots and sharp stones. Initial cuts grew to tremendous pain that Kakuta had to push out of his mind to avoid losing his concentration. From below rose the vapor of the agitated water. More than once he wondered if he shouldn't just teleport down, but each time, he decided to save that option for an emergency.

The descent took two hours. When they reached the river, Douboloz said, "We hurried. We are hungry."

Sloane offered some of the provisions she had taken from the Topsidian glider, but Douboloz declined, as did the other Ferrhians. They took fishing lines out of their bags; each one then took off their boots and dug into the ground with their bare toes until a maggot bit. They removed the maggots, put them on hooks, attached them to the lines, and cast them into the water.

The lines tensed up with a shrill buzzing. Soon they had caught enough of the fish-like creatures with silvery shimmering bellies, dark red backs, and pincers growing out of their jaws like lobsters. The Ferrhians cut them open with their machetes, disemboweled them, cut them up, and stuck the pieces on wooden skewers to roast over a fire. Kakuta tried a little of the Topsidian provisions: finely spun cotton candy pressed into rolls. Then he gratefully accepted the Ferrhians' offer to share their food. The cooked meat tasted like

chicken, mild and pure.

After eating, they set out again, following the river. The incline grew steeper, and the water rushed along at a breakneck pace. The flow was so strong that Kakuta could have believed he was looking at a sped-up holographic recording. The water was dark now with churned-up silt. Branches and twigs floated in it. The jungle alongside them was impenetrable. Vines as thick as an arm and covered in rust-colored thorns snaked around the trunks and hung like curtains from the branches. Reeds and rushes grew thickly in the marshy ground near the bank.

Then the canopy above their heads became sparser, and heavy rain poured down on them. Kakuta again felt painfully aware of the fact that gravity on Pigell was higher than on Earth. The drops drove into his skin like needles.

They were soaked through in an instant. Kakuta's bladder had been full for almost an hour, and he couldn't hold back anymore. He took a few steps to the side and relieved himself. As if summoned, several frog-like creatures were suddenly perched on the ground, croaking deafeningly. They raised their heads up into his stream and drank his urine. When he was finished, they looked at him sadly. *Better to have little friends than little enemies,* Kakuta thought, giving the animals a friendly wave.

Kakuta walked a few steps behind Bechia Yuaad. He was worried about the Ferron. The journey had been much more strenuous than he'd imagined. Surely her disability gave her even more difficulty keeping up. If it did, what should he do? Ask the Ferrhians for a break? Or even teleport Yuaad?

Unexpectedly, the jungle opened up. Kakuta felt like he was standing in a cathedral. The enormous trunks stood far apart here, leaving a circle of almost a hundred meters across completely free of trees. Nonetheless, they weren't exactly in a clearing. On the contrary, the canopy above them seemed thicker and more impenetrable than ever.

It was uncomfortably silent. The only sound came from the edge, where the trees again drew closer together, and two of the giants

were humming to themselves. This time, Kakuta could see their meters-long tongues, like two elephant trunks next to each other that independently felt along the trunks, finding trickles of water and slurping. Every so often, one of the tongues reached to the side, grabbed something—an animal, a mushroom?—and lifted it up onto the giant's back.

"We're here," said Douboloz. "Finally here." With his fragile arm, he pointed high up to the arching tree canopy. "The Citadel."

5.

The Pirates of Penzance

Myranar

Bull woke up first. After a good night's sleep, he felt fresh as a daisy. He used the hygiene cell, then woke up Manoli and finally the two teens.

Sid briefly ran a hand through his black hair, which gleamed as if he'd washed it in olive oil. The sixteen-year-old's unusually pale palms stood out to Bull again.

Sue needed a little longer to fight her way back out of the world of her dreams. If Bull hadn't known she was only a year younger than Sid, he'd have thought she was a child. Nine or ten years old, maybe, though without the aura of invulnerability that still surrounded people at that age.

Sue went over to the Ilt's sleeping hollow and tapped on his head with the index finger of her good arm. "Wake up, Mr. Gucky."

Mr. Gucky mumbled something in a language that was full of clicks and oscillated with a strange melody. Not long after that, Sid came out of the hygiene chamber and sat down with Sue and the alien. Soon after, Bull heard the three laughing.

For breakfast, there was a fruit or vegetable that looked like a blue carrot that had grown unevenly, but it was hot and spicy, with the crumbly texture of meatballs.

"When we get back," Manoli said, "we'll have to write a cookbook: *Manoli and Bull's Culinary Triumphs: The Best of Arkonide, Ilt, and Fantan Cuisine*. Sure to make us rich and famous."

"No need for that anymore," Bull replied. "You're Besun already."

Manoli smirked and waved a modest hand. Then, in an

exaggerated Italian accent, he said, “As my beloved grandmother always said, ‘Ognuno sa navigare col buon vento.’”

“Oh? She said that, did she?”

Gucky stepped over to them. He translated, “With a good wind, anyone can travel to the sea.”

“He really is the Spokesman of the Universe,” Sid said with a laugh.

“*Savior*,” the Ilt insisted. “How is your species so obtuse? *Savior*. It can’t be that hard to remember! If you can’t hear, read it—from my lips or however. Savior!” He winked at Sid, who suddenly grabbed him by the neck, stared straight ahead, then looked at Gucky and nodded cautiously.

Sid’s in the know now too, Bull thought.

By midday, the alien had made all four of them familiar with telekinetic touch as a means of secret communication.

Most of what they had to say, they expressed openly. Bull and his companions assumed the Fantan were listening to them, maybe for the sake of the station’s internal security, maybe out of a sheer desire to feast on the wonderfully exotic thought processes of their Besun. Still, whatever Gucky could tell them about the *Myranar* wouldn’t be a secret to their hosts.

It turned out that Gucky had no precise overview of the station’s structure or scale. Bull’s group had briefly seen the station, at least. The *Myranar* consisted of three “drums,” each over four hundred meters long and eighty meters in diameter, connected to each other by a maze of tubes, in total forming a cylinder of a little over twelve hundred meters.

The whole construction rotated at a fairly high speed. The centrifugal force from the rotation generated a spatial orientation that resembled Earth’s gravity, though not exactly. Bull estimated its strength at 0.9 gravos.

One of the hangar doors had been open during their arrival, with

soft, honey-colored light pouring out into space. Bull had seen countless small and tiny spacecraft, easily well over a hundred. Several of them were parked on the larger landing pads mounted on the space station's outer hull. One of these pads was covered by an energy shield.

Some larger ships had docked on the station's outer hull, and hose-shaped gangways led from the ships into the station. Deeper in space had been at least three of the enormous, eight-hundred-meter-long spindle ships. Bull was sure that these were largely unarmed, or at any rate were not equipped with any high-performance offensive weapons. The same didn't necessarily apply to the *Myranar* itself, however.

They discussed these questions openly. At last, Manoli remarked, "This is all a waste of time. Why should we worry about weapons that could scupper our escape when escape is totally impossible?" He looked around with a questioning gaze. "Isn't it?"

"We're in a kind of energy enclosure," Gucky said. "I can't break through the defensive shields. There are several of them layered together, crossing through each other." He laughed ill-humoredly. "We're living in a golden safe."

"It's called a 'gilded cage,'" Bull corrected him. They argued a little more, and even if their arguments were somewhat staged by now, it gave both of them a little enjoyment. "So, what do we do?" he asked finally. He brushed his index finger over his right temple —the sign that the Ilt should read his thoughts. Then he thought, *Since we can't leave our cage, we should try to make the Fantan pull us out.*

Manoli, Sue, and Sid wore thoughtful expressions. From their tensed backs, he recognized that Gucky was currently informing them telekinetically about Bull's suggestion.

In the meantime, Bull came up with an idea of his own. He cleared his throat. "If we don't do anything meaningful, we'll go stir crazy."

"What can we do that would be meaningful?" Manoli asked.

“Why don’t we put on a play?” He thought at Gucky, *We’ll draw all the Fantan’s attention on us. Build up their curiosity. That gallery up there won’t be able to hold a big enough audience. They’ll have to move us into a larger room. Relocate us. Maybe we’ll even go on tour through the* Myranar. *That might give us a chance.*

It took a while for Gucky to finish informing the others. When he had, Manoli eyed Bull with skepticism. “Acting is a natural impulse to have, of course,” he said, dragging his feet, “but will we spark the, uh…enthusiasm that we would receive on Earth?”

“That depends on the play, of course,” said Bull.

Sue and Sid took to the matter with an excitement that didn’t look simulated at all. The big question was what they wanted to perform. Bull’s first thought was of some practically ancient *Simpsons* episodes, particularly from the stirring thirty-eighth season; Manoli’s suggestions went in the direction of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and David Henry Hwang, whose musical *Aida* he virtually raved about.

Sue and Sid silently shook their heads. Sid, whom Bull would not have expected to be so well-educated, proposed the episode “Rock Bottom” from the legendary series *SpongeBob Squarepants*.

Bull brought up some American classics like *The Sunshine Boys* or *The Odd Couple* by Neil Simon, but (incomprehensibly) these titles meant nothing to the two younger people. He had just as little luck with the later work of the great Ricky Gervais. Even Mitchell Hurwitz drew a blank.

Bull and Manoli looked at each other and rolled their eyes, equal parts disbelieving and desperate. In exchange, *Vampire State Bang Bang!* and *Hell’s Kitchen’s Cleaning Ladies*, the mere mention of which sent Sid and Sue into fits of laughter, were a mystery to the older men.

They were at an impasse.

Gucky had followed the discussion with great—and possibly

genuine—interest, but he didn't submit any suggestions of his own.

Suddenly, Manoli beamed, the smile spreading across his whole face. "I know what we can perform! It's perfect!"

Bull raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"*The Pirates of Penzance*," he said in a stately voice.

"Of course!" Gucky cried, throwing his arms into the air. Bull cast a disapproving look at the Illt.

Clearly, no one knew the piece apart from Manoli...and even Manoli's knowledge was patchy. He'd seen the piece once as a medical student, accompanied by someone who was clearly as stimulating as she was distracting. The evening must have made a big impression on him.

He tried to briefly summarize the piece. According to his recollections, *Pirates* was an old comic opera by Gilbert and Sullivan. A piece from nineteenth century England that had caused a sensation in the US in its day as well.

What had stuck in his memory above all was the premise. The main character was called Frederic. Shortly before his father had been reunited with his honorable ancestors, the man had decreed that his son should go to a private school (or was it a school for pilots?) and be trained there.

Due to an aural misunderstanding—Frederic's? That of a serving woman? Whatever—Frederic had not been signed up for a private school, but a pirate school. He did well and became an outstanding pirate. After his training, he went ashore and saw an incredible phenomenon he had never witnessed at sea: a girl. He fell head over heels, of course. His beloved was called Mabel. Consequent to this were various trials and tribulations interspersed with singing, but at the end it all turned out for the best, with glee and merriment and weddings on the cards. Even the pirates turned out to be kind, honorable, good-hearted men, sadly led astray by fate and now called to serve Queen Victoria and their homeland.

“Like a mirror of life,” Bull murmured.

“And best of all,” Manoli said, “I hardly remember any of the details! We’ll be able to improvise everything.”

Sue raised her arm stump and the healthy arm and waved them both. “I’ll play Mabel,” she declared.

“I’ll be Frederic,” said Sid.

“Me too,” Gucky crowed.

They acted like there was no tomorrow. Slowly, dialogue, plots, and scenes came into being. Manoli gave them some melodies that sounded less like Victorian music and more like old Italian folk songs and popular hits. He clearly only knew one song from the opera, and only one verse of it. That verse, however, he sang with gusto at every opportunity—and with such a lovely singing voice that Bull was downright shocked:

Pour, oh, pour the pirate sherry,

Fill, O fill the pirate glass!

And, to make us more than merry,

Let the pirate bumper pass!

The one time Bull joined in with the song, Sue and Gucky clapped and hollered in approval.

Sue worked in a few small acrobatic routines. She spiraled terrifyingly high into the air, turned pirouettes, and turned over with her body stretched out. Bull held his breath as he watched. To him, it was like watching a figure made of glass that he knew was about to smash on the floor. It took a while before he realized (to his relief) that Gucky was supporting her telekinetically.

When they took breaks, a visibly exhausted Sue would withdraw

to her sleeping pit, which she had surrounded with plants in tubs. Every so often, Bull caught sight of her stroking the twigs, lost in thought.

Manoli and Sid staged a sword duel, appropriating branches to use as the swords. Their acting, their choreography, their musical interludes did their jobs.

Gucky occasionally pointed in the direction of the gallery. Only in these moments (as if the Ilt's finger had made him see) did Bull recognize the fine sheen that lay over the wide windowpane: an energy shield. The shield was see-through, and behind the glass was a densely packed row of Fantan. And not only Fantan. In the evening, when they sat down to eat, Bull watched Manoli pointedly write something on the ground. "F-U-L-K-A-R," Bull read.

The Ara.

Manoli nodded slowly.

Sue's face was flushed; Sid positively glowed. Bull had never seen the boy so relaxed before. It made him feel ashamed. Earth should have been the place where a human like Sid could be happy. Not a cell on a Fantan space station.

After dinner, they rehearsed a little longer. The audience grew. It almost seemed like both sides regretted it when the light was switched to night mode.

The Pirates of Penzance are tired, Bull thought. *And the pirates of the* Myranar *too.*

6.

The “Eternal” Bastion

The Bastion

The man wore a dark red uniform with emblems and rank insignia that meant nothing to Rhodan. He had an athletic build; in his youth, he must have trained his body rigorously. That was long ago, however. This was an elderly man. Age was engraved deep in his facial features.

He kept an entirely respectful distance from Rhodan. Rhodan had never seen anyone so old before in his life. It almost looked as though this man wasn’t physically alive anymore, just kept in motion by a kind of superhuman will. If he had been a human, from Earth, Rhodan would have placed him at 120 years old. But the eyes, foggy now yet still with a shimmer, made it clear he was an Arkonide.

The old man spoke to Rhodan in Arkonide, which he could understand via the translator.

“I knew you would return one day!”

One day? Rhodan didn’t let his gaze wander from the man even for a second. Triumph and pleading lingered in those red eyes, both at once. *He’s crazy*, Rhodan thought. *He must have noticed that I need a translator, but he’s ignoring that. His desire for me to be the one he’s been longing to see must be overpowering!*

The elderly figure took one last step closer to him, gave a stiff bow, and whispered in Rhodan’s ear, “Thank you!” He hesitated for a moment, then moved back again and stood up straight.

“You know I always keep my word,” Rhodan said cautiously.

“Your companions don’t know me,” the man said.

Rhodan smiled. “A man like you doesn’t need someone else to

introduce him. You've made a name for yourself with your deeds. Why don't you tell them who you are yourself?"

The man stood just a touch taller. "It really is me," he said. "Kerlon. Master of the Eternal Bastion."

Kerlon. This is the man whose distress call we followed into the Vega system? The man revered by the Ferrons as the mythical hero Ke-Lon? That can't be. By way of glances, Rhodan came to an understanding with the others that he should continue the game. Clearly, the Arkonide thought Rhodan was someone he'd been waiting a long time for. A great authority figure for him.

"I've been idle," Kerlon said. "All this time." He looked at Rhodan as if seeing him for the first time. "I knew you would have changed," he said. "Elat said so. It's not exactly what I expected, but it's very good. I am impressed."

Rhodan nodded his head gratefully.

Kerlon said, "Your sense of timing is excellent as always. The Eternal Bastion is ready."

"That's good," Rhodan praised him.

The old man snickered. "It is indeed. Presumably, you'd like to carry out an inspection?"

Rhodan nodded. Kerlon observed this gesture with a considering look.

"Yes," Rhodan heard Thora say.

Kerlon looked from Rhodan to Thora and back again. "Who is she?"

"Thora da Zoltral," she introduced herself. Then she indicated Rhodan and added, "His military advisor."

Kerlon burst out laughing. "Of course. Suddenly, you need advice in that area, of all things."

“Her strategic and tactical abilities would astonish even you, old friend,” Rhodan said, smiling at Kerlon. “But you’re right. She’s not just my military advisor.”

Kerlon made a knowing gesture with his hand. “You’ve changed less than your outward appearance would suggest,” he said, startled.

“Now, show us the Bastion!” Rhodan ordered.

Kerlon cast a glance at the two Ferrons. “Forgive me, but is it advisable to share the Eternal Bastion’s military secrets with all those present? Not that I mean to disparage the Ferrons.” He looked at Tschubai and Wuriu. “Nor the two colonial Arkonides in your entourage.”

Ferrons, Rhodan thought. *Kerlon sees it as a matter of course that Ferrons would stop here. That means that in all likelihood, we’re still in the Vega system.*

“We’ll gladly stay behind and guard the transmitter,” Lossoshér offered.

Kerlon’s colorless lips twisted into a contemptuous smile. Then, in a language that strongly resembled that of the Ferrons, he said, “There is no call for that. The Eternal Bastion is mighty.”

Chaktor and Lossoshér looked at each other, startled.

He’s speaking to them like children. Fatherly. Strict. Placating.

Rhodan turned to Thora. “Will you accompany me?”

Thora considered. “No,” she decided. “The honorable Kerlon has waited long for you. Not for me. He has a right to keep his attention on you rather than dividing it.”

The old Arkonide nodded gratefully. “The colonial Arkonides are your bodyguards?” he asked with a glance at Tschubai and Wuriu.

“They’ll accompany us,” Rhodan replied. “Consider them *our* honor guard.”

Thora and the two Ferrons exchanged a few words with each other. Then Chaktor and Lossoshér came over to Rhodan. “Thora asked us to accompany you part of the way.” He turned to Kerlon. “Honorable Kerlon, we should at least gain an idea of where to look for you if we need your help.”

Kerlon considered a moment. “It is wise,” he said, and then with a look at Rhodan, “It will be reassuring for your life advisor to know about the powerful means at your disposal in the Eternal Bastion.”

“Military advisor,” Rhodan corrected.

Kerlon laughed in a friendly, intimate manner. “Are you ready?”

“Ready when you are,” said Rhodan.

The door leading out of the hall was hidden behind a protrusion of rock. It opened smoothly and was made of a red, aluminum-like substance that shimmered slightly. It led into a passageway that made a turn to the right after twenty meters. Shortly after that, they arrived at a gate locked with a numerical combination.

Kerlon typed in the numbers. Rhodan could read the code without straining: “43.”

The gate swung open. A staircase led steeply upwards. The walls were furnished with discs of light, most of which activated themselves as soon as the group got within ten meters. However, some of the discs didn’t turn on or only came on faintly for a few moments before cutting out again.

The floor seemed to be grouted with a kind of metallized plastic that hadn’t been evenly smoothed out everywhere. The walls and ceilings blended seamlessly into one another; they were made of bare rock, which had no protective coating, but looked glazed nonetheless.

The rock has been disintegrated, Rhodan recognized. *The work hasn’t been carried out very precisely. Not everywhere. Construction*

robots would normally do better work than this. Could it be that here in the Bastion, machines and living beings had worked alongside one another?

As they walked up the steps, each maybe thirty centimeters tall, Rhodan counted them. When he got to forty-five—once they had climbed more than ten meters or so—they reached a spacious landing and stood before another locked gate, which Kerlon opened for them.

The long, tube-shaped room that extended before them lay in a diffuse light. Rhodan saw to his amazement that gas lamps burned on the walls.

Kerlon, who was out of breath after the ascent, made an inviting gesture. Tschubai and Wuriu went in front. Rhodan was about to follow when Lossoshér spoke to him. “Maybe we should head back now. Someone should secure the transmitter.”

“Thora’s there,” Rhodan reminded him.

“Yes,” said Lossoshér, “but she’s not a transmitter guard.”

Rhodan looked at Chaktor. The stout Ferron said, “I could accompany him.”

Lossoshér acknowledged this without comment.

Rhodan had the feeling that Chaktor was uneasy. The mere existence of this Arkonide stronghold in the Vega system unnerved him. On the other hand, maybe he was worried that if it came down to it, Lossoshér might put the transmitter’s safety ahead of the needs of the group. Or was he worried about potential conflict between the transmitter guard and Thora?

“Then that’s the decision made,” Rhodan said with a nod at Chaktor. “You’ll go back with Lossoshér and wait for us by the transmitter.”

“How long should we wait?” Lossoshér asked.

Rhodan considered this. Tschubai and his gift of teleportation

provided a guaranteed way back. He named the Ferron equivalent of three hours on Earth.

“And then?” asked the transmitter guard.

“By then, we’ll be back,” Rhodan replied.

“It’s cold in the reception hall. We could catch a chill,” Lossoshér complained.

“I’ll extract all combustible materials from the transmitter and make us a campfire,” Chaktor suggested.

“I find myself unable to laugh at your jokes,” Lossoshér confessed.

That made Chaktor burst into loud laughter.

The two Ferrons saw themselves off and started back down the steep staircase.

Kerlon had gotten his breath by this point. “How long did you tell them they must manage without you?”

“Two tontas,” Rhodan said. He used the Arkonide word corresponding to roughly an hour and a half, which he’d learned from Crest.

“That will be close if you want to inspect the entirety of the Eternal Bastion.” Kerlon sounded disappointed.

“An initial overview would be plenty for now,” Rhodan replied. “I’ll familiarize myself with the smaller details over time.”

Kerlon eagerly agreed. “I’ll show you the tech storage halls, at least one of the great paludariums, the vast spacecraft hangars. And the Bastion’s control center, of course.”

In Rhodan’s mind, he pictured the full splendor of Arkonide technology spread out before him. The energy and defensive shield generators, whole armies of battle robots, the armories, and—if the Bastion really had hangars—the starships.

All of it at our disposal.

Less than an hour's walk later, Kerlon practically collapsed with exhaustion in one of the halls. They had moved through a true labyrinth of corridors, tunnels, and ducts. At one point they had climbed down a ladder; another time they'd had to crawl almost ten meters on their stomachs due to a sunken ceiling.

Lots of things made an improvised, half-finished impression. Others made the even worse impression of a project that had been started, then left to fall into disrepair long before its builder could complete it.

Again and again, Rhodan exchanged baffled looks with his two companions while Kerlon sang the praises of the station's wonders and the technical marvels they would soon witness.

Once more he entered the code number: 43. Before pulling the door open, Kerlon turned to them and said, "Behind this door is the Great Paludarium. You'll believe you are standing on Lannol's surface!"

Lannol, the sixteenth planet from Vega, thought Rhodan. *So we really are there.*

He didn't know much about this world. Lannol, or Vega XVI, had a relatively low average temperature. Not the sort of world the Ferrons preferred. Maybe one day they would adjust Lannol to suit their requirements for life. "Ferrolify" the planet. But that might be hundreds or thousands of years away.

Opening the door was a struggle for Kerlon. Rhodan reached out to help him, but Kerlon fended him off, breathing heavily. Rhodan accepted this, even if he wasn't entirely comfortable with it.

Kerlon breathed deeply a few times, the breath rattling in his lungs. Then he grabbed the door handled with both hands and pulled. Millimeter by millimeter, it opened.

Instantly, they were struck by a bestial stench. Hydrogen sulfide,

ammonia, and a cloying whiff of ethanol. Rhodan, Wuriu, and Tschubai jerked back with a shudder. Kerlon, in contrast, went straight into the room, unbothered.

The room was lit as if at dusk, though the light was sallow. Every so often, a glaring blue flash came from a ball that hung on the ceiling above a sunken basin. The ball was maybe a meter or two in diameter. An imitation of Vega, Rhodan assumed.

Even with its five-meter headroom, the long, wide room looked flat. The huge water basin, surrounded by a waist-high glass barrier, formed the centerpiece of the room.

The paludarium.

The basin was slightly oval-shaped, being at least fifty meters long and forty-five meters wide.

"I've selected native life forms from Ferrol to serve as the basis for our fresh nutrition. This approach has many advantages," Kerlon explained. "Self-provision from internal breeding allows us to dwell in the Bastion unnoticed by the outside world for a long time. Decades, if necessary. On the other hand, should the need arise, we can also fill our stocks from nature. Transport ducts from the neighboring sea are under construction."

"Understood," Rhodan replied dully. He stood next to Kerlon by the glass barrier and was staring into the basin. He kept his breathing shallow. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Tschubai and Wuriu, off to the side, had put their hands over their mouths and noses.

Kerlon grew more and more excited. He extolled certain species as particularly rich in protein, and astoundingly delicious besides. Certain plants that were apparently not only beneficial to health, but could actually extend your lifespan.

The paludarium's artificial landscape had obviously been modeled on that of Lannol's natural environment. A broad strip at the edge represented swampy terrain. This transitioned seamlessly into a shore, while the middle of the basin was taken up by a body

of water with a weak red light glowing from the depths.

Kerlon gave an animated explanation of how Vega XVI, Lannol, was (just like the paludarium) a highly geophysically active world. Turbulent, even. Earthquakes were apparently a daily occurence.

“Three quarters of Lannol’s surface is covered in land, with only twenty-five percent ocean,” Kerlon reported. “The oceans are unfathomable, however.”

Rhodan mentally converted Kerlon’s proclamations into Earth units. Based on that, Lannol’s seas were up to twenty kilometers deep.

Kerlon spoke with the pride of an explorer. “Due to Lannol’s geothermal activity and countless undersea volcanoes, the seas’ depths are consistently warmer than the surface. Winters here can be shockingly cold. The water’s surface freezes over. The Eternal Bastion is extremely well isolated, of course.”

“Glad to hear it,” Rhodan remarked.

Kerlon pointed into the basin. “Many Lannolian animal and plant species winter in the depths of the sea, thus living an amphibious life that varies depending on the time of year. They prefer these bank-adjacent swamp regions. The oxygen content of the air outside is relatively low at eleven percent.”

Eleven percent, Rhodan thought. *That matches the oxygen content of Earth’s atmosphere at about four thousand meters high.* Humans could breathe there, in other words, but would quickly get exhausted.

“The oxygen content in the Bastion is generally kept adjusted to suit our needs,” Kerlon added.

During this speech, Rhodan, Wuriu, and Tschubai stood stock still next to each other, staring into the basin. The water smelled putrid. Animal corpses in various states of decay floated on the surface, bloated and waxy. They were so deformed that it was impossible to draw any conclusions about their shapes when they’d

still been alive. Other cadavers were festering in the swamp and on the shores. The plants, too, whether growing out of the water and onto the bank or from the swamp, were all dead. The flashes of the flickering artificial sun highlighted every detail in the lifeless tissue. It looked like a scene from a primeval planet that had decided to give up on the great experiment of life after only a brief attempt.

Rhodan heard Tschubai groan. Kerlin cast him a glance and called, “Isn’t it magnificent?”

Tschubai searched for the right words. “It’s so utterly different from my homeworld.”

“Homeworld,” Kerlon repeated, smiling blissfully. “You know, sometimes I almost feel as though Lannol is my homeworld now.” He laughed. “A crazy thought, no? As if I were a confused old man.”

He turned away from Tschubai and looked at Rhodan thoughtfully. “They always say that planets are mere stopping points on the great journey, but they actually exert a kind of magnetism on life. They make us their own.” His gaze grew more scrutinizing. “No? Wouldn’t you say that even you’ve gone native on your beloved Larsaf III to a certain extent?”

Rhodan felt it wise to answer with no more than a significant smile. Maybe Wuriu Sengu had sensed that Rhodan was at a loss with this question, because he turned to Rhodan and said, “Could we chat in private for a minute?” Then he touched his index and middle finger to the bridge of his nose, indicating to Rhodan that he wanted to talk about what he’d seen with his special, gifted eyes.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Rhodan said to Arkonide.

Tschubai, observing how little Kerlon cared for this interruption, drew the old man aside. “We’ve been through some very taxing days,” Tschubai said. “It would do me good to sit down for a while. Perhaps you’d keep me company?” He made an all-encompassing gesture. “There must be so much we still have to learn about the Bastion.”

That seemed to placate Kerlon again. He pointed at one of the walls; Tschubai now saw that benches were spaced regularly along it. They went over. Kerlon dragged himself forward and then, with great strain, sat himself down next to Tschubai. He breathed heavily. Tschubai fell silent.

“Your name is?”

“Ras Tschubai.”

“Of course.” Kerlon unwillingly contorted his face into a grimace. “How disrespectful of me not to have picked up on that.”

Tschubai waved a dismissive hand. “It’s an unusual name.”

“Yes,” Kerlon said. “Have I already inquired as to which colonial world you originate from?”

“Sudan,” said Tschubai.

Kerlon pondered. “Of course. Sudan in the Chenta-Pasymon system?”

Tschubai smiled. “You’ll have to forgive me if I can’t tell you everything.”

Kerlon pointed with his chin to Rhodan and Wuriu, who stood very close together and were slowly walking across the room. “Without permission from the commander, at least.”

“You could put it that way.”

“If you’re a member of his guard, may I assume that you possess a special gift?”

Tschubai hesitated. Then he said, “I am a mutant.”

“A mutant. I see.”

“My mother was called Halle Berry,” Tschubai said. “I inherited my mutation from her.”

“May I ask about the nature of your mutation?”

“My mother had six toes on each foot,” Tschubai explained.

Kerlon let his gaze wander back and forth between Tschubai and Rhodan. Then he suddenly broke out into laughter so clamorous that Tschubai was afraid the man might not survive it.

Then he joined in.

“A mutant!” Kerlon squawked. “And I almost believed you. By all twelve star gods of Arkon, how nice it is to have company like you again at last. Men with a sense of humor, who can laugh about themselves. A mutant!” Instantly, he turned serious. “That is what my men have been lacking recently. Humor. They’ve become so quiet and austere. The service has made them too serious.”

“There are other men in the Bastion?” Tschubai asked.

“Of course there are,” Kerlon said. “The crew. The Eternal Bastion’s armed forces.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “By the star gods. I have neglected to inform my people about the commander’s arrival.”

He made indications of trying to stand up. Tschubai stood and offered his hand. Kerlon hesitated, but then let Tschubai grip him under the arm. When he was standing next to Tschubai, Kerlon looked into the human’s eyes.

“The truth is,” he murmured to Tschubai, “I’ve been in need of someone to help me with these things for a long time now.” He patted Tschubai’s arm. The touch was feeble, as if from a flaccid leaf.

“Let’s not keep your men waiting,” Tschubai said in a jaunty tone.

“I see as good as nothing,” Wuriu said, gently touching the tips of his spiky gelled hair with his palms.

Wuriu was neither tall nor thin; on a good day, you could have

said he made a warm and jovial impression. Anyone who described him as “fat” would quickly be corrected by him; he merely “had meat on his bones.” At the moment, though, he looked more thin-skinned and beaten down.

“Nothing you could reasonably call a ‘bastion,’ anyway.”

“What exactly *did* you see?”

Wuriu was a “scanner.” With his gift, he could see through solid matter. Walls, even those made of concrete, posed no problem.

“It’s quite a struggle,” he whispered. “I expected to find a well-organized system of tunnels and ducts, anti-grav shafts, maybe. And corridors to connect everything together, of course. Tech storage, crew quarters, and so on. But the ‘bastion’ is just a hodgepodge of caves or caverns. A remarkable number of them, to be sure, but as far as I can see, their walls are just bare rock. No metal or plastic covering at all, or only a rudimentary one in places. They’re only connected through…I don’t know, fissures in the rock and low passageways.”

Rhodan could see Wuriu’s exhaustion more clearly by the minute. The scanning must have cost him a great deal of energy. “So there’s no ‘bastion’ at all,” he concluded.

“As far as I can see, there’s no fully constructed fortification with a reliable energy supply and life support system.”

“Just the transmitter room,” Rhodan recalled, “and what Kerlon calls his ‘paludarium’?”

Wuriu nodded. “Those for sure. There are also three more paths leading away from the paludarium into the rocks. There are quite a lot of passageways, to be honest, but the rock is impenetrable. I don’t see where any of the technology is supposed to be.” He fell silent a moment. “That said, I can’t completely rule out that everything Kerlon mentioned exists. Maybe it’s all deeper in the rocks, farther down than my eyes can see.”

Rhodan said, “I don’t know who Kerlon thinks I am. I’m just

afraid the truth will disappoint him so much that he won't survive it. Or am I the only one with the sense that the only thing that's been keeping Kerlon alive is his hope that the one he's waiting for would come back?"

"That sounds like psychology." Wuriu smiled. "Not my field of expertise."

Suddenly, Kerlon's laughter rang out.

"We'd better go back to them," said Rhodan.

"Kerlon wants to introduce his team," Tschubai said. "The Bastion's armed forces."

Rhodan looked at Wuriu. The Japanese man shrugged his shoulders, perplexed. "Maybe," he whispered.

They were happy to escape the stink of the paludarium. The air in the adjoining passageway was fresher, the light sources dim but consistent.

They followed Kerlon, who hurried along the sloping path so quickly that Rhodan could already see him stumbling. Now and again, the old man ran out of energy. He stopped in his tracks and rested against the clammy rock wall with a hand, gasping for breath.

"Your Bastion," he wheezed. "Our Bastion. Elite. Our Elite." He coughed. "Ready for service as you ordered, commander, the whole squadron fully upgraded." Another cough. "Many simply no longer believed it, but we forgive them." He stared at Rhodan. "We do forgive them, don't we?"

"Yes," said Rhodan. "We forgive them."

Then Kerlon let go of the wall and ran onward, only to stop and lean against the wall again a few minutes later, speaking almost exactly the same words. Talking of the readiness of the crew, the fleet, and forgiveness.

The path widened; the floor was now covered with a springy, dark green layer. Shortly afterwards, a coating of the same material covered the walls and ceiling.

The light sources were brighter, more reliable. At last, they reached the end of the passageway. They stood before a hatch, or maybe an airlock. Kerlon entered the usual two-digit security code. The door sank slowly and silently into the ground.

It actually was an airlock. One large enough not just for them, but for at least twenty people, maybe more.

After the door had closed behind them again, the air was circulated with a soft hissing sound. Filtration equipment activated itself. Then all was quiet again, and the next door opened for them to proceed.

For one horrible moment, Rhodan had feared an overpowering stench of death here as well. However, the room they stepped into didn't smell at all, except completely sterile. The air was hot and very dry; a continual airstream flowed without providing any cooling.

The room through which this dead wind blew, always even, was a casemate, its endlessly long arch at least thirty meters wide. On each side of the aisle down the middle stood berths crammed full of equipment. At the head and foot of each one towered V-shaped frames bearing a canopy made of a thin metal weave.

From the edges of each canopy hung a translucent film surrounding the whole bed. The bodies on the berths could only be seen in silhouette.

"They sleep in cryostasis," Kerlon whispered reverently. "I have left them to rest as long as possible. I preserved them for this day." He looked at Rhodan, full of expectation.

Rhodan pointed into the depths of the casemate. There had to be thousands of these cryo-beds, all lined up in a row. He stepped up to one of the beds and touched the film. It was brittle and crumbled at his touch like sand. The trickling flow of pieces pulled ever more

and ever bigger fragments out of the film.

Rhodan took a long look at the mummified corpse. The body was unclothed. Based on its stature and its (steadily more visible) facial features, an Arkonide lay before him. One that had to have been dead for centuries if not millennia. Its arms were crossed over its chest. The skin looked mineral, fossilized, but had retained every detail from life. The copse was a soft sepia brown, like an ancient photograph.

Tschubai and Wuriu had stayed a few steps back. “Well?” asked the teleporter.

Rhodan saved himself the journey to one of the others lying in cold sleep. “They’re all dead,” he said quietly.

“They are indeed!” said Kerlon, full of pride. “Dead, but ready for deployment. They are awaiting your orders.”

“What orders am I supposed to give a dead person?” Rhodan murmured. “So, these are your armed forces,” he then said loudly and without any derision/mockery, as if he wanted to shake off any last remaining hope like ballast.

“*Our* armed forces,” Kerlon clarified. “Ready to fend off the lizards!”

“The army waited a long time. What happened?”

Kerlon thought. “What happened? A lot has happened. Of course, a lot of time will have passed for you too,” he said. “Elat prepared me to have to inform you about the events in between.”

“I’m all ears,” Rhodan replied.

7.

The Citadel

Pigell

Kakuta watched as a large wooden disc, three or four meters across, was lowered on ropes. A platform. When it reached the ground, he saw that it was actually made of a cork-like material. What he'd thought were ropes were vines, and they weren't tied to the platform, but growing into it.

The Ferrhians dismissed themselves and withdrew back into the jungle.

Yuaad stepped onto the platform first and stood in the middle. Deringhouse went next, then Sloane and Morozova. They aimed to stand close to the Ferron. Kakuta followed. The vines tightened and pulled. The ride up went smoothly, but not mechanically. At times Kakuta felt a gentle acceleration, then a slight reduction in speed again.

Their destination was visible: an opening in a barky brown ceiling above them. The platform fit into it like a plug. Kakuta heard a soft squelching sound as they came to a stop.

They looked around the voluminous hall. Out of the ground, which looked indistinguishable from a level forest floor, grew shoulder-high mushrooms with glowing caps that exuded a soft yellow light.

The air was refreshingly cool and smelled aromatic; Kakuta breathed deeply. The walls and ceiling were formed of intertwined branches and roots.

Deringhouse laughed softly. "The Thort lives in a treehouse."

Two Ferrhians greeted them. The corridors they were led through gave an equally organic, "grown" feeling, both in their

structure and their wending and weaving nature. Here and there was an open notch in the wall covered by a near-transparent membrane. Kakuta tapped one of these membranes in passing. It felt like skin, warm and soft yet taut.

The floor was slightly springy. More and more, Kakuta had the feeling of moving around inside a living being—of walking through its blood vessels, its veins.

"What is this place?" he whispered to Yuaad.

"The Ferrhians are our best geneticists," she replied. "The Citadel is a highly complex genetically engineered product. It's a living, breathing orgasmism in a nurturing symbiosis with its inhabitants."

A thought came to Kakuta. "If the Citadel is alive, does it also have a consciousness?"

"I don't know," Yuaad confessed. "The Ferrhian genetic architects are always a little secretive about their constructions. Do you like it here?"

Kakuta pondered this a while, then said, "I feel safe."

She smiled as if he'd given a compliment.

The corridor's end was marked with a curtain, its texture a blend of grasses and petals. Kakuta was reminded of an old fairy tale where a young girl slept for a hundred years, ready for a prince to tickle her awake. When she awoke, she was as young as ever and the sleep might have been no more than a dream.

One of the Ferrhians leading them reached into a bag and threw a handful of sparkling dust against the plant mat. Lo and behold, the curtain pulled apart to let them enter.

For a moment, everything was still in the hall. A great number of Ferrhians, dozens of them, all stopped to stare at the newcomers.

Their Ferrhian leader stepped aside and let them pass.

The expansive room they now found themselves in looked like a

cave engineered out of palm fronds and grass. More of the light mushrooms glowed in this room, but here they were taller and more densely packed. It smelled gently of resin.

In the center of the room, in a soft hollow, sat a Ferron on a three-legged wooden stool. He looked neither old nor young. His skin was unusually pale, smooth, and untouched by time. He wore simple gray pants, moccasins, and a white poncho that covered his arms but left them free to rest on his knees.

His face was not only flawless, it was also lacking in distinct features, almost an abstraction. However, just above his eyes, in the middle of his forehead, sat a third eye that was taking them in with a thoroughly unreadable gaze.

"The Thort," whispered Bechia Yuaad.

The man on the stool raised a hand and waved them closer. The Ferrons and Ferrhians drew back slightly—not out of fear, but out of respect, Kakuta could tell.

They stopped before the Thort, the two women in the middle, Deringhouse on the left-hand side, Kakuta on the right with Yuaad close behind him.

The Thort closed his two lower eyes and looked at them only with the one on his forehead. First Deringhouse, then the women, then finally Kakuta.

"So it's true," he said. Even his voice sounded ageless. It was a little deeper than Kakuta had expected, almost a bass. Comfortable. "Those who bring the light return when the darkness calls them."

"They are the Lightbringers!" Yuaad cried with zeal.

The Thort smiled leniently. "She is right, though."

"Sir," said Deringhouse, "we'd first like to thank you for our rescue. I don't know what expectations you place on us, but I fear they could be exaggerated."

"Is that so?" asked the Thort.

Anne Sloane tensed. “What exactly do you want from us? Who do you believe we are?”

The Thort smiled. “I have seen who you are. What do *you* believe you are, then?”

Sloane replied, “We came to the Vega system because we received a distress call.”

“Naturally,” said the Thort. “We are in distress, of course.”

“If you’re hoping for our help against the invaders, I must disappoint you. Firstly, we are neutral. Secondly, we don’t have the technical means to stand up against the Topsidans.”

Kakuta thought, *Who made you our spokesperson?* He said, “We’ll gladly help you as much as we can, of course. After all, as Deringhouse said, we owe you our lives.”

“Each and every person owes their lives to others,” said the Thort. “That alone creates no great obligation.” He stood up, bowed curtly to each of them, then sat again. “I would like to tell you a brief story. Bechia, I ask you, might our guests sit?”

Yuaad left and quickly returned with Ferrhian carrying floor cushions. Kakuta and the others sat down. The cushions took on the shapes of their bodies, seeming to feel them out before solidifying a little.

The Thort said, “Compared with your culture, the civilization in the Vega system may be young, but we have already made our passage over the millennial planes.”

The story the Thort told them sounded archaic and current at the same time, kind of like a distant reflection of human history. A great war in the recesses of time, an endless bloodbath; the arrival of a savior at just the right time, a legendary figure who brought light, peace, when all hope seemed irrevocably lost in the darkness of war. The legendary figure’s name: Ke-Lon. The first Thort’s meeting with Ke-Lon. The promise made by every mythical figure, every King Arthur, every savior: to come to his people again one

day, when the time was right. When? In the greatest hour of need, of course.

Kakuta tasted disappointment on his tongue, as bitter as lemon peel. Legendary figures? Saviors?

"That's not who we are," he said cautiously. "We're just..."

"We're just a handful of people," Deringhouse chimed in. "If you throw us out of your Citadel, we'll be dead in a few days. Shot by the Topsidans or killed in the jungle."

"The jungle is not your enemy," Yuaad interjected.

"But it's not our home either," Sloane said. "We can't help you, Thort."

A Ferron had entered the room. He came over to the Thort and handed him a palm-sized tablet computer. The Thort took the device and looked at the screen. His face remained expressionless.

Kakuta felt the tension in the room. When the Thort looked up, he smiled. "I have no doubt about you," he declared. "You're here to bring the light. But perhaps you came slightly too late."

He tapped on the screen and a voice rang out. It spoke the Ferron language, but with a foreign tone that left no doubt that it was not a Ferron speaking.

The voice said, "My name is Chrekt-Orn. I am the high commander assigned by the Despotate of the 7022nd Doubleyear to the military operation in the Vega system. I demand that you, the Thort of all Ferrons, surrender to my forces within eleven hours. Otherwise, in order to put an end to the blood-spillage, I will consider myself forced to order the step-by-step destruction of all planets and moons of the Vega system. To lend credibility to this warning, I have ordered the first step to go ahead. Enclosed, you will find a visual depiction of this procedure. Your space reconnaissance and all residents of Ferrol will verify its accuracy."

The Thort held up the tablet's screen in front of them. The screen expanded. They saw countless Topsidian ships en route to one of

Ferrol's moons. Then they saw the moon go down in a hail of the heavy bombing and simultaneous cannon fire from the ships.

"I no longer belong to myself," the Thort said. "I will give myself up to the invaders."

Kakuta didn't have to be a telepath to read the thought Sloane was sending him with her eyes: *As Lightbringers, we haven't exactly brought much light to the Ferrons.*

He sensed Yuaad slumping over. "No!" he heard her cry.

Then, even as he thought, perplexed, *What the hell am I talking about?* he said, "All is not yet lost. We will fight!"

"You believe that defeat and fighting can be reconciled?" the Thort asked. "That we can establish a balance, possibly in our favor?"

Kakuta nodded. The plan he had just come up with was improvised, born from his rage at being at the invaders' mercy and at his own powerlessness. He said, "Negotiate with the Topsidans about your surrender. Make it clear that you'll give yourself up, but only to the Topsidian high commander personally. Spread this message as publicly as you can, so the lizards hear about it too. Everyone, including Chrekt-Orn, must be clear that it's on him to prevent further losses—among his people too.

For a little while, everyone fell silent. The Thort because he was thinking, the others because they were watching him think. Kakuta drew in a breath of the room's resinous air, the rain-fresh cool that did the body good after all the warmth.

"He'll suspect us of laying a trap," the Thort pointed out.

"It is a trap!" Kakuta cried. "We'll use your surrender to abduct Chrekt-Orn. I'll bring you into their stronghold, or at least into Ferron hands. The invaders live and think in a military hierarchy. Without their high commander, they'll be disoriented. Then we'll be the ones who can set the terms. At the very least, it'll buy us some time."

“This plan,” Sloane said. “It comes from an old Indiana Jones movie, doesn’t it?”

Kakuta swallowed. Unexpectedly, Deringhouse came to his aid. “Is that an argument for or against it?”

“Any *plan* that keeps us entangled in this Vega war is a bad one.” As if to prove this, she pulled Nyssen’s cigarette box out of her jacket pocket and rested it on her knees.

Morozova cleared her throat. “I’m not sure if your theory is accurate, Tako. The Topsidans appear to work in hierarchies and act with military discipline, no doubt. But their thinking is much more varied, and their social lives presumably are too. They’re clever and resourceful. Keep in mind that they’re lurking in this system with five hundred starships. Faster-than-light ships of their own construction. Technologically, they’re well beyond us. It also requires creative thinking, courage, and by no means blind obedience. We should be on guard against drawing conclusions about their nature, their way of thinking, based on a few experiences in a military context.”

“That’s true, yes,” Kakuta conceded. “It’s probably a useless plan.”

Suddenly he heard Yuaad’s voice. “It’s a plan, anyway.”

“It’s a plan,” Deringhouse repeated. “And it’s good, because it lets us roll the dice.” The Thort showed him a questioning look, and Deringhouse clarified, “Because instead of just giving in to the Topsidans’ demands, it creates a new situation. One the Topsidans haven’t calculated for.”

The Thort looked at Yuaad. “You’ve lived on Pigell for a long time. You know the conditions. Along with them”—he gestured towards Kakuta and his companions—“and my advisors, could you put this plan into action? There isn’t much time left.”

“Yes,” Yuaad said if she’d been given a gift.

Planning this operation had a surreal quality about it, like something from a strategy game. But the comments from the Ferron military and their Ferrhanian advisors, from Deringhouse, Morozova, and even Sloane in the end, pulled it ever more clearly into reality. There were moments when Kakuta could barely even imagine it going wrong.

It was late evening by the time they finished planning. Kakuta felt more awake than ever, free of every shadow of tiredness.

“Shall we go down into the jungle again?” Yuaad suggested.

The Ferrhians descended on the organic platform. Three of the giants were browsing at the edge of the clear space below the citadel.

Yuaad led Kakuta closer to one of the colossi. He heard the creature slurping and sucking.

“They lick up the rain, and they lick up the sap flow from the trees, which increases when it rains. The sap is full of nutrients, full of fungi and spores and tiny creatures that feed on the fungi and their spores. The giants utilize all of that. They even enter into a digestive symbiosis with certain creatures.”

“I understand,” Kakuta replied.

The giant wheezed. A tremor ran through its body. The side flaps rubbed against each other, making a scraping sound. Then the giant moved away from the tree and heaved itself to the next trunk like a grotesquely mutated pudding.

“They have great health benefits,” she added.

Kakuta cast her an astonished glance.

She said, “At the top, on the giant’s back, sits not only its digestive tract, but its stomach cradle too. Whatever lies inside its stomach cradle is made sterile and kept sterile. I know of Ferrons who were heavily injured, who had burns or festering wounds or skin diseases, then went inside the stomach cradle and were healed by the fluids and the giant’s symbionts.”

“Walking clinics,” Kakuta joked.

Yuaad laughed. “No one’s ever put it so amusingly before, but yes, that’s right.”

Kakuta had to give a little cough. As far as he could recall, no one had ever described him, or anything he’d said, as “amusing.”

They watched the giants browse. Now that night came, true night, it got loud in the jungle. Kakuta shook his head in wonder. It sounded like he was inside a rolling mill or an industrial scrap crusher.

“What is all this noise?” He had to raise his voice.

“The hunters, the hunted, and the lovers,” replied Bechia Yuaad. “Life that makes noise so that even in the deepest crevices of the realm of death, it is heard. Even there, where the souls are reflected in stone, have almost turned to stone, one should hear the cry—there is life! Don’t you know such legends?”

Kakuta looked at her seriously. “The legends of a jungle world. Why are you here? Why not...”

“Why am I here and not in a civilized region of the Vega system?” She laughed. “The jungle isn’t our enemy. Besides, Pigell is anything but a pure jungle world. We industrialized the planet centuries ago. Right at the beginning, there was a group of Ferron scientists who wanted to design a native populace for Pigell. A few targeted genetic modifications that would lead to changes in the anatomy of the settlers.”

“The Ferrhians,” Kakuta guessed.

“Yes.”

“But that doesn’t explain why you’re here.”

She considered a moment. “I’m an Appeal,” she said.

He smiled, uncomprehending.

She went on, “My parents belonged to a movement that believed we Ferrons shouldn’t passively wait for the Lightbringers’ return. Instead, we had to call them back. Appeal to them.”

“How, exactly?”

She smiled. “By deepening the darkness. The suffering.” She took a few steps, reminding him of her limp. “My parents had my hip joint surgically damaged. In that way, I’m meant to lend my humble contribution toward calling the Lightbringers.”

“That’s barbaric,” Kakuta said, appalled. “Our doctors could heal that.”

“I’m sure they could,” Yuaad replied. “So could our medics.”

“Then why don’t they?”

“Wasn’t it worth it? You came, didn’t you?” She touched him gently on the shoulder. “You’re here.”

Kakuta silently shook his head.

“There’s an old song,” she said. “It’s about the appeal, the call out of the darkness. About Pigell and its giants.”

“Sing it to me,” Kakuta asked, partly because he was sure she wanted to.

It was an unfamiliar melody, one he had never heard before; the ancient Ferron language she recited it in remained almost incomprehensible to him. However, he felt as though he were being pulled deeply into her confidence with this song. Even her voice, which had always had a distant ring to it, drew closer now.

“Sing something to me,” she requested.

“I can’t do that.”

“I’m sure you can.”

“What should I sing?”

“I don’t know your songs. Don’t you have any children’s songs?”

He had children’s songs, of course. But he couldn’t think of more than the first or second line of any of them. “All I know is the Yamanote Line song.”

“Then sing that.”

He cleared this throat several times and droned more than sang. “Shinagawa, Osaki, Gotanda, Meguro, Ebisu, Shibuya,” and so on. Occasionally he got stuck, but in the end he’d listed all the stations and arrived back at Shinagawa.

“That was beautiful,” she said. “What’s the song about?”

“Nothing at all. It’s just the stations on a train line in the city of Tokyo. Every stop has its own memorable melody too. I know them all.”

“Where does the line begin, and where does it end?”

“Nowhere, actually. The Yamanote Line goes in a circle.”

“Sing it again.”

This time he didn’t get stuck.

The third time, he sang the melody slower, softer, surer. She sang a few of the stations along with him. “Shinagawa,” she said. “That’s where everything ends and begins anew. Isn’t that right?”

“You could say that.”

Then a silence formed between them, bright and clear like a candle flame they were both staring into, spellbound.

Kakuta jumped when he suddenly heard Darya Morozova’s voice. How did she know she would find him here?

She said, “I’m sorry. We’ll have to set out very early tomorrow. The mediators have made contact with the Topsidans. Chrekt-Orn has agreed to receive the Thort personally and has also agreed that

we won't communicate the meeting point until directly beforehand. He understands that the Thort doesn't want to expose the one granting him asylum to any danger."

"I'll get some sleep, then," Kakuta replied.

"Tomorrow's going to take a lot out of us. All of us, but you in particular. That's the nature of your plan."

"Yes," Kakuta agreed.

Morozova nodded to him and the Ferron, then left the two of them alone.

"It's a very pretty song, by the way," said Yuaad. "Have you often traveled on this Yamanote train?"

"Not often. I haven't been to Tokyo often. It's always really crowded there." He left it ambiguous whether he meant the city or the train line.

"And they sing this song all the time?"

Kakuta couldn't help laughing. "But of course!" He was sure she'd detect the irony in his reply.

She looked at him seriously. "I'd love to see your homeland one day," she said.

"You will!" he promised, thrilled by the idea. "Trust me, you will."

Naturally, on this night he spent sleeping in the living Citadel of Pigell, he dreamed of standing on a Yamanote Line train platform with Bechia Yuaad. Of getting into one of the cars with its lime green livery, of her asking him if they could travel long enough for her to have learned the melody of every station by heart.

In the dream, he believed it was law to know all the melodies. He said, "You *have* to! There's no choice!"

"And you?" she asked him in the dream. "Will you have that

much time for me?”

“For you, I’d take all the time in the world,” he said, and that was true beyond the boundaries of the dream.

8.

The Love of Detail

Myranar

The Fantan was a cylinder with a man's height and fine scales, the top end rounded off. The upper half of the elastic body boasted several openings that looked like oversized nostrils. Based on the Fantan's movements and reactions, Bull concluded that these openings served not only as noses, but also as eyes, ears, and mouths. But that was just inference. Bull really knew nothing about Fantan physiology.

From that cylindrical form grew six extremities that all looked completely identical other than being positioned in their own individual spots. They were used as hands or feet as the need arose.

When the Fantan arrived that morning, he was using four of those extremities as legs. There was practically a swing in his step. Shortly thereafter, he introduced himself as Set-Yandar. Between the dark openings on his body that served as sensory organs, Bull noticed a small translation plate.

Around his middle, Set-Yandar wore a wide belt with a number of see-through bags hanging from it. In one of them, Bull recognized a tub of Ovaltine with its characteristic orange design. The other items remained a total mystery to him. Bull would never understand what a Fantan considered Besun and why.

The Fantan inquired after their wellbeing and thanked them for their commitment, which was greatly appreciated on board the *Myaanar*.

"You'll have observed that you have quite an audience by now. Indeed, this cannot be hidden!"

Bull jumped with fright as another Fantan appeared suddenly, separating out from their visitor's back. He was considerably

thinner and shorter than Set-Yandar, reaching to just above Bull's knees. Based on his still-growing tentacles, however, he looked like a duplicate of Set-Yandar.

Set-Yandar made no comment on this duplicate's emergence.

"Am I mistaken, or have you been attempting to sing?" the Fantan inquired instead.

"Attempting?" said Manoli. "I think we've gone far beyond that."

"Oh," said the Fantan. "Your music is very... That is to say... Well, perhaps it merely takes some getting used to."

"Yeah, maybe," Bull agreed.

"We could certainly... Rather, it would be no great difficulty to Fantanize it," Set-Yandar offered.

"That is very helpful," said Manoli. "And tremendously appealing. That said, it could result in our performance losing some of its primitive spirit. We've cultivated a certain love of detail, you see."

"That is... Who could deny it?" replied the Fantan. His upper third slowly tilted towards the tiny duplicate at his side. "For some creatures, the primitive is the most intensive Besun. We want to respect this view, even if...it doesn't exactly... You will come to understand in time."

"We might be able to bring you even more joy," Manoli considered, "if you supplied us with a few props. Those are objects we'd use to—"

"Oh!" the Fantan interrupted. "Yes, we're very familiar with the... Well, why not? It speaks to your love of detail."

He bent down to the duplicate again. "All life forms become loveable when they love," said the Fantan. "Beings of all shapes and sizes."

The duplicate made a sound somewhere between cooing and

chirping. Set-Yandar bent down even further and ever-so-softly touched the duplicate on his upper third.

Then he straightened up again, even seeming to grow a handspan taller, and asked, “What will you need?”

“Costumes!” Sue cried. “A tire, or several. A platform, of course. A rope. Lots of ropes.”

“The ropes represent the rigging of a ship,” Bull explained calmly. “A pirate ship.”

“We need the ship too, of course,” said Sid. “A burning ship.”

“A hologram, naturally?” the Fantan asked.

“No,” said Bull. “That would reduce the impact. We want to give the play a sense of space, because of... Due to the—”

“The love of detail!” the Fantan assumed.

Sue and Sid nodded enthusiastically.

“Fire, then,” said Set-Yandar. “I could approve that; it would be possible. But there would have to be a few extinguishing devices placed on the stage.”

“That would look kinds of weird, wouldn’t it?” Bull pointed out. “Fantan technology on a human pirate ship.”

“Why not?” Sue exclaimed. “We could disguise them, couldn’t we? We don’t have any actors to play the policemen anyway.”

Bull nodded and softly touched Sue’s shoulder. If she got too carried away, she’d be inviting the Fantan to sing with them next. Maybe Set-Yandar could play the Pirate King. Or Mabel’s father, Major-General Stanley. He grinned ruefully.

Set-Yandar pondered a moment, then turned suddenly to the Ilt. “What do you think?”

“I think,” the Ilt said, “that one of my new roommates”—he

indicated Bull—"is anything but trustworthy. He'll take any opportunity to escape. You should keep an eye on him, honorable Set-Yandar. Or better yet, put him in solitary confinement."

"You underestimate our technology," came the Fantan's mild rebuke.

"Solitary!" Gucky shouted. "Darkness! The darkest solitary your vaunted technology can contrive!"

"That is very loyal of you. However, we must ask ourselves, who would take over his role?"

"Me," said the Ilt.

"That is most...courageous," Set-Yandar praised, "but let us not neglect the love of detail."

At the Fantan's request, Bull and Manoli briefly summarized the piece for him. Following that, they were able to express their further wishes in the realm of props, costumes, and scenery. Manoli bandied around a lot of specialized nautical vocabulary to describe all the things needed on a pirate ship. Many of these terms, Bull had never heard before in his life. He could keep up when it came to masts and ropes, but when it got to the bowsprit, jibboom, and fo'c'sle, all he could do was nod knowingly.

The Fantan, on the other hand, seemed to know everything. At least, he didn't ask any follow-up questions.

After acknowledging the requests, Set-Yandar excused himself with the duplicate. He was practically euphoric to hear that the Besun's play would see its premiere the very next day.

They played, rehearsed, paused. After lunch, they rested for an hour in their sleeping hollows. During that time, Bull thought some more about the plan, refining it. Gucky read his thoughts and his orders, and conveyed them telekinetically to the others.

Manoli says, "Understood," Bull read at last, and nodded.

Sid says, "Understood." Again, Bull nodded.

Finally he read, *Sue says, "Understood."*

And what does Gucky say?

Gucky thinks this is all quite risky, but says, "Understood."

In the afternoon, some bulky textile robots arrived. Under Sue and Manoli's direction, they wove fabrics, then made costumes out of them.

When he was sure the Ilt was reading his mind, Bull thought, *Has our benefactor already decided where to build the pirate ship?*

Yes, he read on his back. *It's going in the right direction, but he hasn't quite decided if he should use a hangar, or a storeroom closer to the station's longitudinal axis.*

If push comes to shove, we'll tell him we need the rotational gravity that comes from being on the outside. One of the hangars would be the ideal place for our performance.

Let's wait and see, Gucky wrote. *Maybe luck will be on our side.*

Bull nodded imperceptibly.

While they ate dinner, Manoli said, "You know, that Set-Yandar's actually a pretty nice guy. And a good father. Or mother. For his daughter-son." He indicated the size of the duplicate with outstretched arms.

"Are you offering yourself as the Fantan kid's godfather or what?" Bull snorted.

"Don't be so picky. You remember how humans used to picture invaders from Mars. Beasts who came to our peaceful land with their tripods and laid into it."

"Only to fall victim to the flu virus in the end. Or be single-handedly defeated by the US president. You hardly even knew which of the two was deadlier." Bull smirked. "At any rate, the good guys were good and the bad guys were evil."

“Clear sides.”

“And now? Now we’re valuable souvenirs in an alien souvenir harem, sheltered and looked after by living, well-mannered, bendable termite hills.”

Manoli nodded without taking the suction tube out of his mouth. “You know, I’ve been asking myself what the message of our pirate play is. The message our benefactor’s young offspring will learn, for example.”

Bull twisted his mouth into a grimace. The message surely wouldn’t be: *All life forms become loveable when they love. Beings of all shapes and sizes.* It would instead be a far more devastating message, sadly born of necessity: *Humans are not to be trusted.*

9.

The Events in Between — Part One

The Bastion

Kerlon suggested giving his report in a more comfortable environment. “There are only refrigerated beds here,” he said apologetically. “Let us go to the Bastion’s control center.”

Rhodan gladly agreed.

The path Kerlon led them along gradually narrowed so much that they had to move sideways, feeling the oppressive walls against their chests and backs. At one point, Rhodan even held his breath and feared he’d never get out without Tschubai’s help.

Then the passage suddenly widened into a series of vast caverns, most of them empty. One of them was filled with piles of technical clutter.

Rhodan cast a glance at Wuriu. The latter nodded and embroiled Kerlon in a conversation. The elderly Arkonide raved about the Eternal Bastion’s weapon chambers, of its inexhaustible arenals. Soon, the Bastion’s very own shipyard would go into operation. At first it would produce small, nimble one- or two-man fighters, later huge combat craft for crews of two hundred, even a thousand.

“The Eternal Bastion could become the nucleus of a true Imperial province.” Kerlon beamed.

Meanwhile, Wuriu had taken this opportunity to get a good look at everything. He returned to the group.

The path had narrowed again; they moved in single file. Rhodan let Kerlon go in front, with Tschubai following. As soon as Kerlon was out of hearing range, Wuriu reported to Rhodan that he hadn’t found anything usable, only empty storage batteries, defective shield and anti-grav generators, and a trunk full of used-up

battledresses.

For some devices, Wuriu couldn't be sure what they were meant for at all, or even if they were of Arkonide origin. "A garbage dump," he whispered. "Nothing but scrap."

"But how?" Rhodan asked. "How did the scrap *become* scrap?"

"To start with, all this equipment is pretty ancient. A lot of it shows battle scars, while quite a few items have been cannibalized for parts. Ruthlessly, at that."

"We've nearly reached the control center!" Kerlon called to Rhodan and Wuriu over Tschubai's head.

Another hatch was opened by the same all-too-familiar number combination.

When they caught sight of the control center, it was a true surprise. Inside the giant hall, which was at least 120 meters high, just as wide, and twice as long, stood a visibly old Arkonide auxiliary craft.

The letters on it were faded, but still legible: *Tosoma X*.

The control center turned out to be no more than an auxiliary craft from the *Tosoma*, and thus a sister ship of the *Good Hope*.

Shortly after they had entered the old spacecraft's bridge, Rhodan asked to be allowed to bring the rest of his companions there. "Not that the Bastion needs it—but you can never be too strong to wind, right? All reinforcements should thus be welcome," Rhodan argued.

Tschubai left the bridge. Kerlon called a robot over, a boxy contraption that rolled on a single wide caterpillar track. Its head sat on a metal telescopic neck; its face was modeled on that of an Arkonide, but with a transparent rear side that allowed a glimpse into the machine's positronic inner workings. "This is Curaploy," Kerlon said by way of introduction.

The robot served them a drink that tasted vaguely like hot lemon and was pleasantly refreshing.

Kerlon put no effort into hiding his surprise when Tschubai arrived back on the bridge shortly afterwards with Lossoshér and Chaktor. The two Ferrons had clearly been arguing with each other but didn't want to continue with their argument anymore.

Tschubai left the bridge again to teleport and returned a few minutes later with Thora. His hands were trembling slightly as he accepted a drink offered by Curaploy, which he gulped down.

They sat in a circle with Rhodan directly next to Kerlon and Thora opposite. Tschubai and Wuriu sat to Rhodan's left. The two Ferrons had to wait a moment for Curaploy to bring portable chairs from a neighboring room.

Kerlon ordered the Positronic to give him a visual overview of the current situation. The panoramic screen showed the ongoing space battle in the Vega sector. Kerlon, visibly exhausted by the walk through the Bastion, suffered a brief fainting spell.

Before Rhodan and his companions could do anything to intervene, Curaploy had delivered a high-pressure injection to the old man. *This isn't the first time this has happened,* Rhodan concluded from the machine's routine-looking response.

Kerlon came to. "That's strange. What's past is present. Where should I begin my report?"

"I'd like it chronologically, please," Rhodan said. "Don't leave out anything substantial, including things that you and I are both familiar with. Some of your guests"—he gestured toward Thora —"aren't familiar with the story. I have no secrets from them."

"Understood," said Kerlon. He bent forward a little, far enough that he could only see Rhodan beside him out of the corner of his eye. Instead, he looked at Thora directly. "It's a story of war-torn days, full of events that you know from your history lessons at best. That's if they haven't fallen into complete obscurity. They do play out on the Imperium's outer reaches, after all."

A coughing fit interrupted him. Again, the robot was on hand with a helpful injection.

"I'll start from the day that he and I"—he indicated Rhodan with a hand—"said goodbye to one another in the Larsaf star system."

Kerlon's Report, Part One:

He had asked me to come to him at some point during the day. Others would maybe say he *ordered* me, but that wasn't the kind of relationship we had. Besides, we had stood shoulder to shoulder in too many battles and saved each other's lives too often. All right, fine, it was more him saving me than the other way around. I was so young then. So young that it all feels like a simulation to me now.

At some point during the day, then. He knew, of course, that I wasn't fond of this lack of specificity. I always prioritized the accurate, the precise. Still, I gladly forgave him this little snobbery. In the end, as anyone from the outside looking in would have to admit, he got the job done. No, that's an understatement. His work was far more than merely adequate. It was exemplary.

The colony on Larsaf III was flourishing; no one could deny that. He had made smart decisions. Instead of settling in the vast open lands, we had concentrated on one of the smaller continents. The scientists, the ethnologists, the experimental historians, the whole corp of the cultural scientists had put their research stations into effect. Those who had made first contact were preeminent xenopsychologists one and all. But he was too, of course. A psychologist of distinction.

The native population of Larsaf III was an interesting one. Not only because its members were almost identical to us in terms of biological structure. There was a kind of heedless humbleness to their species when it came to our technology, as if they wanted to say, "Yes, it's good, I suppose, but not *that* good." I wouldn't have been surprised if I had one day discovered one of their cleverest minds, a coppersmith perhaps, on board one of our ships, next to

one of the field propulsion units or transition drive. I could picture them telling me, “Impressive piece of kit, but have you ever thought of this or that improvement?”

I can’t help laughing as I think of them. They were self-assured to the point of imposure; they were shameless thieves. Worse still, they had no concept of personal property. Still, they were charming in their haughtiness, in their zeal, in their unwillingness to respect any kind of boundary that we set.

At first, I didn’t share his enjoyment in these creatures, as he will remember. Only later did I realize where his inscrutable sympathy with these half-savages came from: he saw himself in them. A spitting image of his younger, untamed self. Yes, it seems to me that the fool who couldn’t get enough of them was a child of that kind of narcissism.

Forgive me for this interpretation. You see, I even laugh about it myself. Most likely, everything was completely different, and I was the fool, not him. Maybe I still am now.

No, Curaploy, leave me alone with your nauseating injections or I’ll permanently decommission you on the spot. If you want to do me some good, bring me a drink.

Where was I? Ah yes, that day.

I rode the elevator to the topmost floor of the tower he had personally conceived of as the crown jewel of his prefecture. At its core, the building was a veritable fortress, complete with defensive shield generators, cannons whose fire reached far beyond the satellite’s orbit, and both open and concealed hangars for submarines and space vehicles.

Some of the best military architects and fortress builders had run wild on Larsaf III and elsewhere in the system. To me, it felt like some of them practically went out of their way to find the most exquisitely complicated conditions for their building works.

Anyway, he’d left this tower up to the prefecture’s architects. An anachronistic symbol of his affinity for the archaic.

After I stepped out of the elevator, I had to go up the last few steps on foot. Then I finally reached the terrace. He had chosen to furnish the tip of the tower with a spire made of Cyarii glass foam, a shallow, four-sided pyramid of that material so impossibly fine as to be barely visible. The base of this glass pyramid jutted out past the walls of the tower, at least five meters on each side, and was made of Cyarii too. It felt like stepping into emptiness, walking in thin air.

Or, in his case, relaxing high in the air on a pneumatic couch, where he was looking out across the land and the sea. The sea was unbelievably blue that day and shimmering as if painted by one of the star gods. A day of practically merciless splendor.

With a wave, he instructed me to take a seat on the chair that unfolded next to his couch. He said, “I don't have good news, I’m afraid. It could all come to an end.”

“What could?” I asked, confused.

“Everything,” he said, and sipped at a fermented drink which he had gotten by, believe it or not, doing a deal with a local brewer. Probably with a promise to marry his shapely daughter.

Forgive me.

So, the bad news. “Everything?” I asked, making a gesture that included the entire land below me, the continent where our colony was based, and perhaps all of Larsaf III.

He laughed softly. “If we’re not misinterpreting the data from our military analysis divisions, the enemy has responded to our efforts to concentrate all defensive fleets around the old worlds. In the future, they’ll prioritize attacking the Imperium’s almost-exposed outposts and, from the looks of things, overrun them in spite of our heroic resistance. Unfortunately, the enemy’s guns don’t show the kind of respect for our courage that the emperor would like.”

As ever, I rebuked him for his disloyal remarks about the emperor, and I expected that he would, as ever, counter with a

naughty remark; for example, one suggesting that the emperor take refuge in—how shall I put it?—autoerotic acts of fondling that are not especially well regarded in the Crystal Palace.

That was his way back then.

But he ignored my admonition. He stood up in a flowing motion, put the glass down, and stepped over to the almost invisible wall of the spire. “Sadly, the emperor doesn’t give a shit what happens to worlds like Larsaf II if the enemy ravages the system. He doesn’t care what happens to the colonists, no matter how many patriotic songs are sung about them in the Imperium. And that’s to say nothing of the native population.”

I wasn’t sure if he was right or not. One thing was sure, though: the Imperium was in the bloom of its youth. In a way, it was lucky that the conflict with the alliance of methane breathers had occurred in our era not a few decades or centuries earlier, when inner turmoil would have meant the Imperium was in no fit state to defend itself.

Nevertheless, the enemy was attacking on so many fronts, and was employing such immense force, fighting so unrestrainedly, so *un-Arkonidely*, that they kept bringing our fleets into ever greater distress.

“If only I knew what drives the alliance,” he considered.

“Hate,” I said. “Nothing explains why they’d attack us. The methane breathers can do as little with our worlds as we can with theirs.”

We had discussed this topic plenty of times. We were both of the opinion that the alliance of methane breathing peoples could have been integrated into the Grand Imperium according to their life principles without much difficulty. There would have been an efficient solution on both an economic and military level: we could have defended the same solar systems if necessary. Our areas of interest didn’t overlap.

“Hate?” He had always advocated the position that hate was too

weak a motive. Hate was like love—more of a transient feeling. “No,” he said. “It can’t be hate.”

Years earlier, he had begun to argue against carrying out the altercation with the alliance on a purely military front. He had written countless petitions to the regent asking for scientists to be assigned to research the methane peoples’ histories. He wanted them to send out expeditions to find out whether there was a relationship between the peoples of the methane alliance and the ruins we had discovered over time on a few gas giants in our galaxy.

“We have to know our opponent if we want to defeat them,” he had contended. “The unknown remains unfathomable. The unfathomable remains incalculable. The incalculable makes our strategy go to waste.”

I didn’t know if or how the regent had reacted to his entreaties. To us, to the colony on Larsaf III, no news about that had arrived, at least.

“If it’s not hate that drives the alliance,” I continued, resuming the thought, “we should take the diagnoses of our xenopsychologists seriously. Maybe the methane breathers really are the emotionless creatures they’re overwhelmingly described as in the specialist publications. The decision to go to war with us was one of cold calculation, the mathematical weighing up of advantages and disadvantages, of prognoses and perspectives. In their brains, this war must appear as something purely logical, even obligatory.”

“Pure logic and sheer nonsense don’t rule each other out,” he remarked. “Everything, even an absurd system based on delusion, is full of irrefutable logic in and of itself.”

“But you don’t believe in logic,” I said.

He laughed and tapped his forehead. “Have you forgotten that logic lives a life of its own in me?”

“If it’s not hate and not logic, what is it, then?” I asked. “What

drives the alliance?"

He looked out a while across the sea and its surging waves, over the lush forests of many shades of green, over the breathing gardens and parks at the foots of the prefecture, and the white buildings of the colony. "Fear," he said finally. "An unquenchable, inexhaustible fear propels them."

"Fear of the Grand Imperium? That would be understandable if we were tyrants. Unrestrained destroyers. But we're not."

"We know what we are," he said. "Who knows what the methane peoples see in us?"

I should mention that back then, I preferred to simply see the alliance as no more than an enemy that we had to defeat to survive. I believed that understanding at the wrong time could kill.

I no longer know what I expected of him that day. Maybe that he had scored a coup. That he had managed to persuade the fleet high command to relocate a meaningful contingent of our warships from the core regions of the Imperium to the periphery, into the Larsaf star system. That we would cease to be a meaningless border colony and start to only playact weakness for the alliance's benefit. That we would employ weakness as bait and set up the system's two gas giants as traps.

I could picture it all as clear as a hologram: dozens, hundreds of ships like the *Tosoma*, hidden among the rings of ice and rock that surrounded the smaller of the two gas giants. Ships that would fly out into open space at the appointed time and take the alliance's powerful war machines unawares, without the protection of their energy shields.

But he had planned nothing along those lines. Instead, he said, "I have instructed the fortress architects to build a concealed refuge for the colonists on Larsaf II."

"Only for the colonists?"

He smiled. "For the colonists, of whom one or two might have a

few locals accompanying them."

"Larsaf II," I said. "That's an...inhospitable place. The surface is hot enough to melt lead. It's a world with a pure carbon dioxide atmosphere."

"Yes," he replied. "Hardly a place where the methane breathers are likely to look for oxygen breathing refugees."

"You want me to go to Larsaf II," I deduced.

"No," he said. "I want to send you somewhere farther removed."

"To one of the gas giants, to lay a trap for the alliance?" I hoped.

"No. You'll be flying to the Vega system."

Kerlon kept talking a while longer, but his enunciation grew quite vague, and they couldn't understand much.

Curaploy rolled up to his side and delivered another injection. The old man straightened up again. He stared first at Rhodan, then at Thora. "We defeated them, no? In the end, the Grand Imperium always wins. You're living proof."

Kerlon's glance in Thora's direction was imploring. Rhodan waited for her reaction. Her face remained strangely unmoved, with no hint of triumph.

Was the conflict Kerlon had spoken of, this war with so many victims that he seemed to have experienced as a kind of turning of the tides in the Grand Imperium's history, actually nothing more than a meaningless footnote in the Arkonides' millennia-long history? Had Thora never heard of the alliance of methane peoples?

"We won," she said at last. "With outrageous losses. Many of the great battles of that period are used as reference material in the space military academies to this day."

"So we won," Kerlon repeated. "Well, maybe he hoped that by fleeing to the Vega system, at least a few of us would survive the

methane breathers' assault. Maybe he just wanted to keep me far away from the space battlefields, away from the war. He didn't succeed. Shortly after that I had my own war to deal with."

He smiled bitterly and fell silent, his eyes shutting despite the drugs he had been administered. The master of the Eternal Bastion had fallen asleep.

Shortly before midnight, the cabin door announced visitors. Chaktor and Lossoshér. Rhodan invited them in.

Not beating around the bush, Lossoshér asked, "What do you make of this story?"

"Do you believe it?" Chaktor added.

"I see no reason to think that Kerlon is lying," Rhodan said.

"Of course he's not *lying*," Lossoshér said, "but we can't exclude the possibility that everything he's telling us is the spawn of his deluded imagination. That he's insane and falsely believes himself to be Ke-Lon."

"And we're *not* excluding that possibility," Rhodan said in a placating effort.

"Do we have to keep listening to him?" Chaktor asked. "We're losing valuable time. The majority of the Bastion is worthless. Its crew is dead. Let's put the transmitter on board the *Tosoma X* and then launch the ship."

"And go attack the Topsidans," Rhodan expanded.

"Of course," Chaktor said.

Rhodan looked at Lossoshér. "What do you think?"

The transmitter guardian agreed with Chaktor. "We should leave the Bastion as quickly as we can, in any case. There must be some kind of fungus in the air. Something is giving me a raging headache."

Both of them looked at Rhodan.

"You're right. We should launch as soon as possible. But it's not possible yet. If we set out with the *Tosoma X* right now, we'll be heading out with a single ship that we know as good as nothing about. We don't even know if it's combat ready."

"The Positronic can give us a diagnosis," Chaktor insisted.

"Would you trust that?" Rhodan asked. "What if the Positronic itself is defective? If it gives us unreliable data? Do you want to be approaching a unit of Topsidian warships when you notice the defensive shield generators are damaged beyond repair?"

"We'll carry out some test maneuvers in space beforehand," said Chaktor.

"Of course we will," said Rhodan. "You, Chaktor, and you, Lossoshér, are fully familiar with all the required systems. I'll pilot, and with Thora, Tschubai, and Wuriu, the ship will have a well-practiced crew, as needed for a combat mission."

"We have complete trust in you," Chaktor reassured him.

"Thanks," said Rhodan. "I know that time is of the essence, but rushing could put everything at risk. Let's hear what Kerlon has to say about his deployment with the ship. Maybe we can draw our conclusions from that."

"That's not the only reason you're hesitating," Lossoshér said.

"It's a good reason." Rhodan smiled. "But you're right. It's not the only one. We still don't know about how the *Tosoma X* is anchored in the Bastion. How risky would a launch be for the ship, for the station? Are we really where we think we are? On Lannol? And finally, what do we do with Kerlon? I assume he represents the foremost authority for the Positronic. What if we leave him behind in the Bastion, then along the way, the Positronic refuses to follow our orders because they conflict with some prior arrangements of Kerlon's that we don't know about? What if we take him with us and he suddenly gives orders that lead the ship to its doom—and us

with it?"

"What if in a few days there's nothing left to save on Ferrol and the other planets?" Chaktor asked in return.

"You're curious, Rhodan," Lossoshér added. "That matters to you as well, doesn't it? You're hoping to get information about the history of the Vega system out of the old Arkonide."

"That's correct," Rhodan confessed. "Maybe that's my greatest hope, even. That Kerlon's report will give us an information advantage that we can exploit against the invaders." When it came to his other hope, to discover more about the events in the Larsaf system, Rhodan kept silent.

10.

The Circular Starway

Pigell

This time they were transported by a glider, a wedge-shaped freight vehicle refitted for passengers. The Thort sat next to the pilot, three Ferrons behind him. On the last, widest bench seat, Darya Morozova and Anne Sloane had sat down by the windows with Tako Kakuta and Behcia Yuaad squeezed in between them.

Kakuta looked past Morozova. Outside. He could see the jungle from above, a universe of green foam. Then came the sea, with a few drilling platforms in the distance; they extracted oil, methane, and manganese, Yuaad informed him.

"The Perto archipelago," the Ferron said. An island chain had appeared on the horizon, a collection of grayish green elevations.

From one island, a thin line rose up into the dense clouds. "Golessy's Land," Yuaad explained. "The main island. A freight elevator reaches up into orbit from there. There's also a small spaceport, Hocmulad. That's where the Topsidans will land."

"Where will the Thort meet them?"

The glider began to make its landing approach. Yuaad said, "We're landing on Decseaduu. That's the archipelago's biggest and most untouched island. From there, the Ferrhians will take us to Bolcati Perto. Bolcati Perto is a kilometer and half away from Catocamo. Catocamo is a recreation area. Then, from Catocamo, it's just under two kilometers to Vicedma. At the Vicedma port, a cargo ship will be ready and waiting for you. The captain and some of his officers have been briefed. Your companion will be on board."

Kakuta cast a glance at Morozova. She looked through the window with clear interest. Sloane, on the other hand, had closed her eyes and looked totally relaxed even though she was the one

who would be going into action first.

They'd left Deringhouse behind in the Citadel. The women's assignments were clear: Sloane would provide additional security with her telekinetic abilities; if need be, she could hold off superior numbers of Topisdans. Morozova, meanwhile, had at least a rudimentary understanding of the Topsidian language. She would be leading the negotiations with the captive high commander.

Deringhouse had no role in Kakuta's plan.

Yuaad, the other three Ferrons, Kakuta, and Sloane formed the Thort's official retinue. In the worst case, they would follow him into captivity and support him there—but that was only plan B.

Yuaad's involvement wasn't Kakuta's idea; he'd have been happier if she'd stayed behind with Deringhouse. However, the Thort had followed his own advisors on this front, and that meant keeping Yuaad with him.

She said, "For the time in between that you need for recuperation—half an hour, you said, right?—the Ferrhians will prepare a hideout on Catocamo where you can rest up and the captured Topsidans will be under guard."

"Good," Kakuta replied.

That was the plan. The Thort would step over to the Topsidans accompanied by an unarmed honor guard. Among them would be Kakuta, whose arms lay hidden under a Ferron poncho, his face painted dark blue and half-covered by a wide-brimmed hat akin to a sombrero. At the right moment on Bolcati Perto, Kakuta would touch the Topsidian high commander and teleport to Catocamo with him and the Thort in tow. There, he'd have to take a breather while the Ferrons and Ferrhians took charge of the high commander and took him by ship to the Vicedma port—i.e. to Morozova. Morozova was then to begin negotiating with the Topsidans.

Kakuta, meanwhile, had to retrieve Yuaad and Sloane as soon as he could. Neither of them would be carrying weapons just as none of the Ferron men would, and they'd be recognizable as

noncombatants. Still, should the Topsidans act aggressively towards them, Sloane would keep herself and the Ferrons off their back with her gift—long enough, at least, for Kakuta to arrive and jump again.

And the three Ferron men? They would wait; they would try to flee into the jungle. Kakuta didn't necessarily have to know what they would do.

The ship would bring the imprisoned Topsidian high commander back to the jungle continent. There, he would be kept prisoner in the Citadel.

Kakuta didn't like thinking about how many humans and Ferrons were involved in carrying out his plan. How many the plan put in mortal danger. The touch of pride he'd felt at first had long since given way to worry and to horror that the Thort had been desperate enough to gamble on this plan.

That said, Kakuta couldn't shake the feeling that the Thort himself didn't believe in the plan at all, but was using it as a cover for who knew what. To conceal an entirely different plan, his other, *true* plan.

The Topsidans had agreed to the Thort's trivial conditions. They were content with Bolcati Perto as the location for him to give himself up and for him to reach the island a few hours from now. Kakuta hadn't taken part in that discussion; Yuuad had told him later that the Thort had referred to certain characteristics of the island, its mythical quality, its special meaning in the context of Ferron culture. On Bolcati Perto, the first spacefarers from Ferrol had set foot on Pigell for the first time. Since then, when they were taking new, era-defining steps, Ferron government ministers, Thorts, astronauts, artists, and captains of industry had sought out the blessing that came from Bolcati Perto time and time again.

Kakuta hadn't completely understood whether the Thort himself believed in these ties between the political and the magical, but that didn't matter.

He bent forward and looked past Morozova and down at the ground. The island they were just flying over was completely

industrialized. Kakuta saw sprawling factory sites and vents spewing white steam. Buildings that reminded him of the cooling towers of nuclear power plants. A flying creature suddenly appeared next to them, a maggot-like shade of white, its head taken up by a gaping maw. Its black bat wings both beat and *pumped* at the same time.

"An Aouziz," Yuaad whispered. "So far away from any clusters. It must have been exiled. It doesn't have much longer to live." Her voice was dark with sorrow and sympathy.

Finally, Decseaduu came into view. They didn't talk anymore before landing. On the wide beach, heated practically to glowing embers in the heat of the day, the Ferrhians waited for them. They were to carry the Thort, his Ferron companions, Sloane, and Kakuta to Bolcati Perto. Only one of the Ferrhians took a different course. In his frame, he would take Morozova to the Vicedma port.

The pilot launched the glider again, but he wouldn't be flying back to the Citadel. The other three Ferrons stayed back. They would be the ones to whom Kakuta would hand over the captured Topsidan.

The Ferrhians, with the Thort, the Ferrons, Sloane, and Kakuta on their backs, had almost reached Bolcati Perto when a Topsidian ship emerged from the heavy clouds above them. The ship was gargantuan, the enormous control sphere growing out of the cylindrical section. The overall shape looked like a fantastical submarine, an otherworldly Nautilus on the way to an otherworldly Atlantis.

It almost annoyed Kakuta that the sight took his breath away. Given the ship's crew and their murderous mission, he should have felt nothing but contempt. Still, in that moment, he was overcome with sheer gratitude at being able to see this starship from an unknown solar system as it stopped its descent less than two hundred meters from the island and held itself weightless in the air. It had traveled a long way; it was awe-inspiring and magnificent.

The Thort led them to a round plaza that gave Kakuta the

impression of a large circus ring; it measured about a hundred meters across and was covered with a mosaic. The small, glazed stones depicted the Vega system, albeit in a heavily stylized manner with unnatural proportions. Yuaad explained to him that the mosaic was what gave the plaza its name: the Circular Starway.

In the center of the mosaic was a sculpture, a very slim oversized hand. It was open in a gesture that perhaps reached out for the stars but was maybe one of pleading.

From what Kakuta had seen during their approach, the island was not inhabited.

Behind the sculpture and at the edge of the plaza, something huge and misshapen was moving around cautiously. “A giant,” said Kakuta, amazed. “How did it get to the island?”

“They rise up out of the sea,” Yuaad reminded him. “A good omen.”

All was silent. Kakuta could hear the clacking of their soles on the stones. Astonishingly, it was cooler than he had feared. The coolness seemed to be emanating from the mosaic.

The Vega system’s new masters didn’t leave them waiting long. A heavy battle glider was unloaded from the ship hanging above Bolcati Perto, which rapidly and silently descended nearby, landing no more than twenty meters away from the group surrounding the Thort.

Eleven Topsidans emerged, one after another. They barely took five steps before stopping.

Kakuta stared at them. *How are we supposed to recognize the high commander?* he thought, alarmed. The lizard beings looked so alike as to be impossible to tell apart. He couldn’t glean anything from the rank insignias on their uniforms either.

All the Topsidans walked under the protection of individual energy shields—*which is enough to ruin the plan,* Kakuta thought. He and Sloane were powerless against those devices.

He watched as tiny machines flew out of the Topsidian glider's opening. Some of them looked like winged spiders; others more like floating bars of silver with a single eye gawking out of it. *Cameras,* Kakuta recognized. *The Topsidans want to record this historical moment for posterity.*

The flying spiders whizzed and whirred around a few times, then went back into the glider in one swarm.

"Checking us for weapons," Yuaad assumed.

Kakuta nodded. He shifted a little closer to the Thort, now standing at arm's length behind him.

The Topsidans moved towards them in closed ranks. Some of them wore beamers in holsters, while two of the lizard-like beings held hefty halberds that Kakuta hoped only served a ceremonial purpose. The majority were not visibly armed. The row came to a halt.

"Thort," said one of the Topsidans in the Ferron language as he took a step forward. This lizard being had a number of scars on his face and body, some of them appearing very old indeed. "We accept your surrender."

The Thort replied, "I have not yet surrendered. And I will not do so here on the Circular Starway."

"Then why did you have me come here?" the Topsidan asked. Kakuta tried to discern an emotion in the question. Rage, indignation, maybe even curiosity. He didn't manage it.

The Thort asked, "Are you Chrekt-Orn?"

"I am Chrekt-Orn, high commander of the Vega system. I'm here to prove that I am willing to meet you and your desires as far as possible and within reasonable boundaries. I will not let myself be made a component of any obscure ritual, however."

"Forgive us," said Yuaad. "We have so little experience with being invaded and attacked unprovoked that we lack the appropriate sense of tact for such a situation."

The Thort commanded her silence with a weary hand movement. “I am the Thort, and as Thort I must follow certain formalities. I cannot place myself into your hands. Another must deliver me.”

“How?” Chrekt-Orn asked.

The Thort pulled back his shirt sleeves to reveal his forearms and held them slightly outstretched in front of him. Then he asked his companions, “Which of you will take it upon yourselves to give me up?”

As arranged, the group, including Yuaad and Sloane, took a few steps back. Kakuta too took a first step, appearing to hesitate. Then he reached for the Thort’s left wrist, held it tightly, and moved it towards Chrekt-Orn.

Slowly, the Topsidan reached out to take the Thort’s arm. At that moment, Kakuta reached for the Topsider. The high commander reacted with uncanny speed. He bent backwards, twisting over his tail, then stood upright again and ducked, his hand making for his holster.

“Grab him!” Bechia Yuaad shouted.

The Thort tore himself away from Kakuta. Kakuta threw himself forward. He grabbed the Topsidan’s hand, the one that had pulled the weapon, with both of his.

Then he teleported.

He arrived at his destination and let go of the Topsidan. Chrekt-Orn stumbled for a step or two, then got his bearings. He raised his arm. At the same moment, three Ferrons threw themselves onto him. They tore his weapon away and removed his belt before he could activate his personal shield.

Kakuta hunkered down and let it all happen without interfering. He closed his eyes, breathed deeply in, then out, then in again. Only for a few minutes.

Then he jumped back to the Circular Starway.

Too early.

Too late.

11.

Tidings From Tramp

Myranar

Day

Reginald Bull had slept poorly. He'd repeatedly jolted awake from his dreams, in which he'd seen a bloodbath with not only Fantan among the countless dead. Manoli had spotted Fulkar among their observers. What if the doctor wasn't the only Besun who would come to the performance? What if their escape—the escape of five Besun, counting the Ilt—claimed ten Besun lives as collateral damage? Twenty? A hundred? Not to mention the possible victims among the Fantan. Set-Yandar and his daughterson.

Bull scrambled out of his sleeping hollow with a soft groan. To his astonishment, Sue was already finished with breakfast. Her face glowed with excitement.

Am I asking too much of her? he thought.

She waved to him with childlike joy.

"Everything looking good?" he asked.

She reached into a bag and pulled something out with her thumb and index finger; it was small enough to disappear between her fingertips. Her hand gesture with the two pressed-together fingers looked like pantomime.

"Looking good!" she said.

Shortly after breakfast, when they had carried on with their rehearsals, Set-Yandar visited them again. This time, he camer alone, but his body was enclosed in a kind of transparent sack. Set-Yandar told them he wanted to show them the new performance space.

Manoli clapped his hands cheerfully. “Go right ahead!”

“I’m afraid a small security measure is necessary. I cannot spare you this.” With two of his tentacles, he pulled a hood over the upper quarter of his body. The hood drew itself in while the sack inflated.

A protective suit, Bull thought. *What for?* Then he heard a soft hissing. *Gas. They’re flooding the room.*

Shortly after, he felt vaguely dizzy and fell to his knees. He’d barely touched the floor when he lost consciousness.

Bull snapped his eyes open. He was lying under a sky studded with stars. Above him hung a planet, a blue-green disc so close that he could see the sluggish drifting of the clouds. He took in the deep blue oceans and turquoise islands within them, strung together like the letters of a secret code. He wondered if it was the Fantan homeworld—so similar to Earth, yet so different.

His head and face were free of any covering. He could breathe without issue, and he was comfortably warm. There had to be an energy shield separating him from the vacuum of space.

To his right stood a few containers alongside and on top of each other. He slowly drew himself up. A faint bitter aftertaste still lingered on his tongue. Why wasn’t the station’s centrifugal force flinging him into space? Evidently, the station had other means of generating artificial gravity besides rotation alone.

“Getting lost in infinity?” he heard Manoli say behind him.

Bull nodded without turning around. “Are the kids doing okay?”

“Yes,” said Manoli. “Sue’s still not one hundred percent but the anesthesia didn’t worsen her condition.” He smiled. “The clever Fantan takes good care of his Besun.”

“She has to get back to full strength,” said Bull. It sounded unintentionally selfish.

Manoli just nodded and said, “A curious place.”

They watched a few ships flying past them. Space gave no points of reference for their size, but Bull knew that some of the spindle-shaped constructions were eight hundred meters long. Dimensions that exceeded human imagination.

The Fantan vessels were no warships. Aside from their shield projectors, they flew unarmed; their vast inner realms were mostly taken up by the propulsion units needed for transport. This too was seemingly miraculous technology that allowed them to exceed the light speed barrier. *True starships.*

All the more breathtaking, yet horrifying in equal measure, was that even these magnificent Fantan ships didn’t represent the technological pinnacle of spacefaring races. In fact, the spindles were decommissioned transport vessels from the Grand Imperium—low-level tech from a culture that had been traveling through space and building up their stellar empire since time immemorial. Bull could scarcely imagine how an Arkonide-inhabited solar system might look if their second-hand goods were so spectacular.

One of the giant Arkonide-Fantan spindles was just approaching the planet to land, all in the majestic silence of outer space.

Manoli said, “The Ilt is also better, by the way.” He paused. “Pretty lively in this solar system, huh?”

“Our solar system will look like this one day too. Neither of us will live to experience it, but this is how it’ll look.”

“We can’t exactly complain,” Manoli replied. “We’re getting to experience this, right?” He balled his left hand into a fist and gave Bull a friendly punch on the upper arm.

Bull was moved but shook his head gently. “As prisoners,” he said. “That’s not what I mean. I’m saying I want to experience what it’s like to fly out in a real starship. To launch from Earth, travel to the stars, then come back again. To land in Terrania.”

“Terrania.” Manoli laughed softly. “The city for all mankind.

Perry's vision. Speaking of ships, you haven't even looked at yours yet."

Bull turned to Manoli for the first time and then followed the man's outstretched arm. A metallic surface lay beyond; the Fantan had apparently cleared a portion of the station's landing zone to make room for a shallow basin.

At the edge of the basin, he spotted Sue, Sid, and Gucky. Internally, Bull scolded himself for not looking for them first and instead letting himself be held captive by the incredible view.

The youths and Ilt were standing close together with their backs to Bull. All of them were looking at the construction floating in the basin. It vaguely resembled a sailing ship. The three-master was scaled down like a model, but was still over ten meters long. However, it was made entirely out of a material the color of coal, including the masts and the unnaturally smooth sails.

"The Black Pearl," Bull marveled. "Am I wrong?"

Manoli laughed. "That would be the most Besuntastic of all Besun, of course."

On the other side of the ship were spectator stands rising up in a steep quarter-circle. From the looks of things, there were enough seats for four, maybe five hundred audience members. At present, they held a few dozen.

A vehicle with caterpillar tracks came towards them in a strangely weaving motion. It had a kind of trunk on wheels in tow. Bull recognized the Fantan steering the vehicle as Set-Yandar.

"Do you forgive us the brief negation of your consciousness?" the Fantan asked. "Medical advice assured us that there would, in all probability, be no or only limited lasting damage. And now you're here! I hope it's all just as you... In any case, we've gone to every effort."

He got up from his seat cushion and teetered out of the vehicle using three of his extremities. Then he touched a button on the

trunk, making its sides and top turn transparent.

Bull gave a soft whistle through his teeth. All those swords, cutlasses, black hats, goblets, glasses and tankards, rum and wine bottles and hoses, little bags full of quicklime, historical English police uniforms, flintlock pistols... What a fabulous plunder!

All abuzz, Set-Yandar walked the length of the trunk, raised the see-through lid, and indicated a few details with his tentacles, introducing them as he went. "'*Pour, oh, pour the pirate sherry*'—here is the fermented fruit juice drink for which the pirates thirst, as mentioned in the song. There are the glasses. They're made of actual glass!" He continued to drone, "'*Fill, O fill the pirate glass!*' And, to make the men more than merry...happy, yes? The bumper that is passed around."

The much-sung-about "bumper" was a tankard of earthenware. Without a doubt, it had been brought here from Earth. Set-Yandar lifted it out of the trunk and passed it to Bull. The vessel had to hold at least half a liter.

"Fairly Besun," Bull said in praise.

"Isn't it?" replied Set-Yandar. Bull thought he could hear something like glee in the Fantan's voice. "And you will actually perform for us today?"

"But of course."

Manoli gave a little cough. Bull threw him a concerned glance. "Everything all right?"

"Better than ever," Manoli said feebly.

"You sure about that?"

"Something wrong?" enquired Set-Yandar.

"Some slight health problem. But he'll pull through." Bull gave Manoli an encouraging clap on the back.

"You are incredible," Set-Yandar whispered. "Many we-families

will be present without interruption. That includes my own we-family. Without interruption!"

They discussed a few more small details. Who would ignite the ship? Who would control the shield generators? Set-Yandar saw no issue at all; he would request portable generators. "What a spectacle!" he exclaimed.

Then he uncoupled the mobile trunk, climbed back up into the tracked vehicle, and drove away.

"What the hell is a 'we-family without interruption'?" Bull asked.

"There are indications that the Fantan reproduce via parthenogenesis or autonomously, perhaps even asexually through a kind of budding," said Manoli. "Their 'we-families' could be groups of genetically identical individuals who grew out of one another but have the role of parents or children."

Bull nodded. Maybe the presence of such a we-family was seen as a special honor.

Manoli tried to read Bull's expression. "Are we changing our plans?"

"No," said Bull. "Why should we? We have a premiere lined up. Are you feeling sick enough?"

"Yes," said Manoli. "Time to seek out the doctor."

Set-Yandar took the news with suitable unease. "He needs a doctor after all, then."

"A good one," said Bull. "One familiar with our physiology."

"Naturally," the Fantan agreed. "We'll do everything we can to ensure that the performance... It shouldn't founder for lack of a doctor."

Shortly afterwards, Eric Manoli was sitting across from the

doctor.

Fulkar resembled the image of a human reflected in a fun house mirror: impossibly tall and lanky.

“The Fantan respects my privacy,” said Fulkar, “so you can speak openly. Is the young woman recovering well?”

“Sue’s doing fine. I am too.”

“I know. You have another reason for your visit.”

“We’re going to escape,” Manoli announced.

“You’re going to try,” Fulkar corrected him.

“We’d like to extend you the offer. You can come with us.”

“On your journey to nowhere that’s destined to fail.”

Manoli nodded. “That’s possible. Besides, you’re leading a comfortable life here. You have your own little empire. A satisfied clientele. You can also look forward to substantial retirement benefits.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your life as a Besun of the Fantan.”

Fulkar regarded him thoughtfully for a while. “You don’t look overly young, Manoli, but you also don’t give the impression of a well-traveled man. Out there,”—his long, skinny, marionette-like arm indicated the indeterminate vastness of space—“there’s much worse than being kept as Besun on board a Fantan station.”

“I understand.” Manoli stood up. “Thank you for what you did for Sue.”

The doctor had saved her life on the flight to the *Myranar* when the transition shocks had overwhelmed her weak constitution.

Fulkar nodded.

Just as Manoli was about to step through the opened door into the corridor, Fulkar called after him, “Just in case...where and when would I have to be at your disposal?”

Manoli explained the whole plan and the role Fulkar was supposed to play in it.

“Completely hopeless,” Fulkar judged.

Manoli laughed, and at some point Fulkar joined in.

“You’ve been speaking to Gucky?” Bull asked Sue, smiling.

She remained serious, as she usually did, and nodded. “He’s really nice.”

“He’s not human.”

“I know.” She and Bull were sitting next to each another on the metal floor. Sue looked at him, alert. “Is being nice a particular privilege of humans?”

Bull had to remind himself that despite her meager appearance, Sue was not a child anymore. “What I meant was that we can’t read his facial expressions. We have no experience with him, with his species. We don’t know about his plans. His background. We don’t know where he comes from.”

“Tramp,” she said. “His world is called Tramp.”

“That sounds like an English word,” said Bull. “It makes me think of Charlie Chaplin. Do you know Charlie Chaplin?”

She shrugged. “Gucky told me all about Tramp.”

“What did he say?”

She didn’t answer.

“If it’s supposed to be a secret he told you in confidence, you don’t have to share it. I’m not trying to interrogate you.”

Smiling, she replied, “It’s not that. He said that Tramp is a world with many bodies of water, including lots of clear rivers. They each have a particular color. Some are silvery blue, some rain green, others reddish gold or like translucent copper. Where they flow into one another, there’s a beautiful richness of different shades. Their moon is really small and quick. It orbits the planet at such a low height that it touches the planet’s atmosphere, making a kind of whispering or moaning sound. A nighttime song from the sky. They live in hollow trees that grow enormously tall. Rivulets run down the insides of the trunks, and they’re saturated with a kind of resin that’s sweet and nourishing.”

“Sounds like a paradise planet,” said Bull, smiling. “Don’t you think?”

She nodded. “I don’t believe a single word of it, by the way.”

“What *do* you believe then?”

“That one way to be silent is by not saying anything, and another way is by telling long, pretty-sounding stories.”

Bull nodded. “What are you thinking overall? Can we trust him?”

“Can we afford not to?”

“That’s a beautiful planet,” said Bull with a glance at the blue and white globe above them. “I’d love to see it up close. Lots of planets, actually. Not long ago, we thought the Moon was the last stop on the line. Maybe Mars at a push. Either way, space was a dead end, no matter how vast it felt. Now, all of a sudden, it’s open wide to us. That’s an unexpected stroke of luck.”

“Maybe it’s not luck at all.”

“What else would it be?”

She lifted both shoulders. Bull thought, *A stroke of luck—that’s what you are too. And Sid.*

He said, “Luck or not, the possibility is there now. We should use it. Or at least, we shouldn’t let the Fantan take it from us. Right?”

Sue briefly closed her eyes, then said, “I’m ready.”

They began late in the afternoon. The stands had filled up. Bull and the others had taken their positions on the ship of coal. Bull sensed the emotions of Manoli, whose gaze wandered across the audience. Bull thought, *The SETI Project on Earth has been looking for them for decades. Must have been looking in the wrong direction.* The aliens were here—and not even as isolated delegates from distant worlds or shipwrecked individuals. They were sitting there in the thousands in quiet anticipation of an enthusiast performance of *The Pirates of Penzance*.

The audience was predominantly made up of Fantan, but Bull spotted plenty of other species among them. Some vaguely resembled animals from Earth. Bull saw reptilian forms right alongside compact, human-like ones with elephant trunks growing out of their faces. Between them, dog-headed creatures clung to each other like a cluster of bodies. Big, pale wings flapped as if fanning the whole area.

None of them was a caricature. They stood or sat there with the presence of Egyptian temple idols. Only they weren’t carved out of stone; they were living, breathing beings.

Other spectators looked like prehistoric colossi: Goliaths with bulky, hairless skulls that had three jet-black eyes gazing out of them. These dark giants looked as if they could withstand any storm the universe could throw at them.

Next among them was an ethereally light being that Bull had at first taken as a sculpture of a spider, one made of glass and gauze. At one point, Bull even thought he’d seen a pair of demons. The creatures were half billy goat, half human grimace, with two horns sprouting from their foreheads—a fever dream from pagan Christian mythology made flesh. As they both raised their arms and began to wave at Bull with a large white towel, he turned away from the stands. *Now I’m going crazy,* he thought.

“Everything okay?” Manoli asked, worried.

“As good as it gets,” said Bull with a wry grin. “I feel like I had some kind of vision.”

Manoli raised his brows questioningly.

“It’ll just be the stage fright,” Bull reassured himself.

“How I love patients who diagnose themselves.” Manoli smiled with relief. “Anyway, in case you don’t trust me anymore and are looking for a new personal physician, I just saw someone in the audience whom I consider quite outstanding.” He gestured sideways with his chin.

Fulkar was sitting at the edge of one of the first rows and looking at the stage with a serene expression.

Behind the ship towered a projection surface, thirty meters by thirty, with symbols scurrying across it that Bull couldn’t read. Scattered around it were the rod-shaped fire-extinguishing robots, which Sue had dressed in the old English police uniforms. Bull could also see the two energy shield generators next to the ship. The lamps on the machines were lit a dull shade of violet; everything was set up just as he had discussed with Set-Yandar.

Bull adjusted his eyepatch; Manoli put on a commanding face. Sue and Sid stretched. On Sid’s right shoulder sat Gucky, adorned with a fantastically colorful feather plumage. Sid’s shoulder was narrow enough that the Ilt had to cling on to Sid’s head with both hands.

“Don’t ruin my hairdo,” Sid hissed.

“What hairdo?”

Bull nodded to Gucky, who nodded back. Bull could see strain in him. The deployment of his paranormal senses cost the Ilt energy. “Take care of yourself, little one,” he murmured.

Set-Yandar appeared before the ship and made circular gestures towards the public with all his tentacles.

“A speech!” Gucky cried, rejoicing.

The Fantan actually addressed the public. Without any greeting, he enumerated some technical data points: the strength of the gravity generators, which they could credit for the solid ground beneath their feet; the energy performance of the defensive shield generators.

"The Besun," he said, finally addressing the evening's main topic, "whose activities many of us have already witnessed, will henceforth allow us a glimpse into the exotic power of their imagination, into the dreamlike wonderland of their primitive minds that are closer to the core of creation than ours by many epochs. Deliberately or not, everything they do, they do in praise of the lord, of all things. If anyone is so beguiled by one of the Besun performers that they wish to trade it for a Besun of their own, they may make the owner an offer after the play is finished. But enough!" he cried. "Show them the favor of your attention. The Pirates of Penzance are stepping into action!"

And how, you human trafficker! Bull thought. *It's showtime.*

12.

The Events in Between—Part Two

The Bastion

Kerlon slept for a long time. Curaploy denied all of Thora's urgings to wake up the old man with pharmacological means by plainly ignoring her instructions.

Rhodan considered using the time to further explore the Bastion with Tschubai and Wuriu, thinking there might be further surprises, positive or negative. In the end, though, the worry that they might miss Kerlon's awakening—and his report—overrode that idea.

Chaktor and Lossoshér banished the boredom in their own ways: Chaktor with his holographic family album, Lossoshér by taking precautionary measures against ominous diseases he might have contracted in the depths of the stronghold, i.e. gymnastic exercises and self-massage. Now and again, Chaktor cast him a disinterested glance and then was once more absorbed by the recordings of his three wives and two dozen kids.

"I hope you don't lose track of them all," Lossoshér said with feigned concern.

"Let's see," said Chaktor, then proceeded to list the names and birthdays of every member of his large family.

It was noon when Kerlon finally awoke. After eating something, he continued his report.

Kerlon's Report, Part Two:

I only grasped the time pressure when he asked me to set out for the Vega system on the very same day. When I reached the spaceport that evening, it became clear to me that I wasn't the only

one he had given an order to launch. Our official assignment was to act as scouts, exploring the area surrounding Larsaf's star system and securing it.

"And what kind of 'securing' is he expecting, might I ask?" was what Mikual da Opess wanted to know. We were using the same glider to fly to the landing site. The autopilot had calculated the route in a way that meant I would reach my destination first. From there, I would journey on with the *Tosoma X*.

"Hasn't he spoken to you about it?" I wondered. "The usual, of course. Establishing an early warning system, marking planets and areas of planets that could be considered for building a retreat site —"

"I already know all that, young'un," the old man interrupted me. "I already know. I'm more amazed that he imagines any kind of security is possible under the circumstances. If the alliance of methane peoples sends a fleet towards Larsaf's star, a few bunkers in the Gonga system or around Vega won't scare them off. Nor would a few probes we might place here and there in empty space. The idea is laughable." He took on a pondering tone. "Unless he's expecting the Methanes to come across our security measures and laugh themselves to death. That would be an ingenious strategy."

"Sadly, they're not known for their senses of humor," I replied.

"No," the man conceded. "Making his plan all the more baffling."

The glider stopped and I got out. It had cooled down; a breeze blew in from the sea. Only from the *Tosoma X* did a remnant of warmth radiate.

"I wish you a good flight and every success on your mission," said Mikual da Opess.

I thanked him and returned the wishes. Shortly before the autopilot could close the cabin door on him, I asked, "Where are you being sent, by the way?"

"To Gonga. Didn't I say that?"

“Oh,” I said. “Be careful. It’s supposed to be scary there.”

“It’ll only get scary when I arrive with my people,” he promised with a droning laugh.

I had heard wild rumors about the Gonga system. An Arkonide space unit had supposedly been involved in a skirmish there with the Methanes where they had surrounded the enemy, only for a monstrosity to burst through the Arkonide lines: an invulnerable titan, a being that was a mixture of arkonite and darkness.

A tough story to believe, but it wasn’t the first horror tale I’d heard about these destruction-addicted giants.

In any case, I was happy just to be sent to Vega, which was a peaceful region according to my records.

“Don’t you worry about me, young’un,” said the man. “You keep yourself safe.”

Two hours later, I was ready for launch. Air traffic control gave me the go-ahead. I saw Larsaf III getting smaller in the panorama hologram—a blue and white ball that could have been made of mouth-blown glass.

We went forward in short steps. Despite my youth, it wasn’t the first time I had commanded the *Tosoma X*. I’d gone from astronavigator to commander; I could thank my deployments with him for that too. There were some new crew members on board, but some familiar ones. The pilot, for example, was Maureuc. He was a Naat, and in fact one of the first Naats to ever graduate from the Arkonide space academy. Someone had prevented him from being assigned to a ship in the central fleet; they probably wanted to conceal that the warships launched from our shipyards couldn’t be crewed with Arkonides alone anymore.

My first officer, Bening da Cushad, I knew from earlier missions, much like Ilicia da Sfehor, the fire control officer.

I wanted my team to get warmed up.

All that aside, it had long since become standard operating procedure to take a circuitous route to the destination. That was intended to prevent any observers—enemy observers—from using our flight vector to ensnare the ship at its exit point after rematerialization.

We reached the Vega system with our seventh transition. Vega itself was bigger, brighter, more blinding than Larsaf's star, and markedly younger too. With its forty-three planets and their hosts of moons, it formed a cosmos unto itself.

A cosmos at war, however, as we realized to our astonishment.

The system's locals, who had reached the other planets from their homeworld of Ferrol and settled them, were using their interplanetary space travel technology to enhance their national wars with new theaters. The violence that members of that species brought against each other put even the methane alliance's cold-hearted destruction against the settled oxygen worlds into relief.

"A civil war," Bening da Cushad explained after we had evaluated the com chatter we tapped into.

"Good or bad for us?" Ilicia mused in an undertone.

"Neither one nor the other," Cushad replied. "Insignificant either way. They are at war with one another, but the war is playing out in the circle of the inner planets. If we're actually going to establish a shelter from the alliance here, we could choose one of the other planets that are more hostile to life."

I said that I could hardly imagine the methane breathers mustering up any interest in this system to begin with. "They're not fighting against all oxygen breathing species. Just against us."

"Maybe because they hope it will break the resistance of the oxygen breathers as a whole," said Ilicia. "Destroy the strongest first, then nothing will stand in the way of taking down the weak ones."

"You think like a Maahk," Bening da Cushad commented.

“That sounds suspiciously like a compliment,” came the answering retort.

The pair’s endless arguing, their love-hate relationship that always flared up, fascinated me as much as it repelled me. I said, “I don’t want to hide under a pile of corpses.”

“Even though it could provide an excellent hiding place, Kerlon,” said Ilicia.

Bening da Cushad laughed.

“Not for me,” I said. The Naat lowered his voluminous skull in a measured gesture of agreement.

“The highest honor,” da Cushad sneered.

“An honor from someone who has saved your ass more than a few times with his maneuvers,” I reminded him.

“Which means your ass has at least one friend on board the *Tosoma X*,” Ilicia jibed.

I actually had to admit that Ilicia da Sfehor’s argument couldn’t be dismissed out of hand. The Ferrons were employing microwave weapons, firing torpedoes at each other’s ship hulls that were equipped with ordinary warheads, or nuclear warheads at best. They wouldn’t have been enough to ignite an energy fireworks display.

But it would be enough. If the alliance of methane peoples sent a ship to Vega for whatever reason, it would draw their attention.

However, after taking stock of the situation, I couldn’t bring myself to proceed with the agenda and fly back to Larsaf III. I suddenly felt as though I were standing in the middle of a battlefield, the earth white like bleached bones, the sky white like eyes without pupils. I waded ankle-deep in blood. The heat of a flaming wreckage burned at my back. I walked past a landscape of death, mountains of amputated limbs; I smelled burned hair, burned skin. First as if across an abyss, then nearer and nearer, until finally screamed pierced my eardrums from all around—the

screams of the wounded and the dying, the wailing of survivors about the appalling losses.

“Kerlon, let’s fly back now. Kerlon? Kerlon!” I became aware of Ilicia gripping my shoulder. “What’s with you?”

“Nothing,” I said and shrugged off her hand, whose touch would otherwise have been so comfortable to me. “Nothing at all. I’m just thinking.”

“She’s right,” said Bening da Cushad. “We should go back as quickly as possible.”

“Why should we?” I asked. “That’s not our mission. Our mission is to secure the area. We haven’t secured anything here yet.”

“How are you hoping to do that?” da Cushad asked. “Let’s just fly back.”

Maureuc looked at me questioningly, waiting for my orders.

“We’re not Methanes,” I said. “We’re Arkonides. We’re not going to allow what is happening here.”

“Jeez!” said Bening da Cushad and turned away. “Moral da Moral has taken over command. Ilicia da Sfehor, swing your delightful ass into position and take your place at the fire control console. We’re stepping in.” He looked at me, half amused, half disgusted. “We’re stepping in, right?”

“We are indeed,” I said. “Maureuc, Ilicia, let’s show these space cardboard boxes that the *Tosoma X* is coming to tell Vega: the war is over.”

The *Tosoma X* was immeasurably superior to the Ferron spacecraft. We didn’t shoot at the manned ships, but rather flew right in among them and dealt with the torpedoes. We brought their space battle to its knees.

During our fourth intervention, the two Ferron sides unified against us. They coordinated fire of their torpedoes against us,

coordinated attacks with their microwave weapons. We let what they had to offer fizzle out against our defensive shields.

Quickly, the battle was at an end. Both sides contacted us offering an alliance. We ignored them.

Then another com signal reached us. It came from the homeworld of the Vega residents, the eighth planet. A man called Thort Guall greeted us. “Lightbringer! How long we have awaited your arrival!”

Awaited? It sounded like the words of a man who had lost all reason, but my curiosity was aroused. The protests from Bening da Cushad only spurred on my defiance. I set a course for Ferrol.

It was an oxygen world in the habitable zone around the giant blue sun. The war had transformed large portions of the planet into a death zone, however. Radiation contaminated whole regions; the ruins of cities lay like bones bleached in the sun.

We flew to the source of the communication: An ancient castle of coarse stone, surrounded by a scaffold, no doubt to expand it. Around the castle hill was a medium-sized city, noteworthy solely because it wasn’t destroyed.

A single man awaited us. Blue skin, humanoid. He could have been a colonial Arkonide.

“I am Thort Guall,” he greeted me. “Your arrival brings the light back to the Ferrons!” He was a wiry, scarred man. An old warrior. A third eye sat in the middle of his forehead. He was tall, and his gaze seemed to see both into the distance and into my deepest depths.

“I am Kerlon da Hozarius,” I said.

“I will show you Thorta, Lightbringer, the future capital of all Ferrons. Come!” He turned around without making sure that I was accompanying him.

I followed.

The city of Thorta was not especially impressive. Under normal

circumstances, it wouldn't have been worth an entry in the ship's log for me. But the Thort... He spoke with a certainty that came across as almost uncanny to me. He told me of the Ferrons' war, which had now raged for more than a century. He spoke of the "Dark Age." And he, the first Thort, was poised to end it. His pronouncement was laughable, but I didn't laugh at him.

The Lightbringer, he elaborated, would help to end the Dark Age. He pointed at the *Tosoma X*. "With this ship."

"What are you asking of me?"

"Show the Ferrons everywhere in the system that they must bow to my might. It will be trivial for you. A few days will suffice to save billions of lives."

I returned to the ship, wrestling with the choice before convincing myself to do it. I had already stepped into the Ferrons' war. Going back to the Larsaf system would have meant that our interference was for nothing. I had to finish what I had started.

Thort Guall named the destinations; the *Tosoma X* wiped them out. The team's grumbling died down quickly. It did them good to actively do something, not just wait for the Methanes to strike.

In some wondrous way, the Thort was always present at the scene of each strike. He made sure that they were all associated with his name. It was an impossibility. The Ferron spacecraft were far too slow to explain his appearances...leaving aside that we never located a spacecraft. The Thort appeared as if out of nowhere and disappeared again just as inexplicably.

When I asked how he managed this, he replied, "I'm the Thort, the all-seeing, who is in all places at once." When he noticed my rising anger, he added, "I will reveal my secret to you, Lightbringer, when the time is right. You will be repaid for your services. After you have crowned me as Thort."

So it came to pass. After a few days, the Thort's enemies surrendered, and I, the Lightbringer, crowned Guall in the great hall of the castle, which he had expanded into his palace. The

celebrations went on endlessly. My patience ran out; now that I was at peace again, I became conscious that I had acted against my orders. I had to go back to the Larsaf system. We decided to set out while the celebrations were still ongoing.

It was an affront, but they seemed inclined to let the Lightbringer get away with it. Unchallenged, we marched back to the ship. It was ready to launch. But I didn't give the order yet. I wanted to say goodbye to the Thort.

After a long hour—a calculated affront as an answer to ours?—the Thort came to our ship.

"Lightbringer, do you mean to leave without your gift?"

"It's not customary for my people to expect one," I replied. What could the Ferrons have to offer us?

He didn't let himself be distracted. "You wanted to know how I could be in multiple places at once, didn't you? Then follow me!"

The Thort led me into the vaults under the castle. There, in a chamber, stood a high arch in the middle of the room, all on its own, not supporting anything. My first association was that it looked like the entrance to an invisible house. Only at my second glance did I notice that the slender floor rested on a pedestal that was not even knee high.

"This is my secret," said the Thort. "A matter transporter. It's a gate. It leads to other transmitters scattered everywhere across the system."

"And that's how you could reach the other planets without a ship."

"Precisely. To my fellow Ferrons, it appears as though I can be in several places at once. I let them believe that. That let me establish myself as a sovereign. But without your help, Lightbringer, it wouldn't have been enough to rise up to the Thort of all Ferrons."

The arch lit up. "Come, Lightbringer. You should experience it for yourself." Together we stepped into the device...

...and stepped out of an identical one on another world. It was cold; the air was thin. We were in a cave. Outside, sleet was falling.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"On Lannol, one of the outer worlds. You have nothing to fear. It's harsh. There are no Ferrons here, and there will be none for a long time, if ever."

We stepped outside. A hill descended steeply, almost vertically into a platinum colored lake. For a moment, deep peace filled me. This place seemed endlessly far from the suffering and death of war.

Silently, we dwelled in our thoughts. When the cold penetrated our bones and the thin air made us pant, we went back. Ferrol was only a step away through the transmitter.

"Who built this transmitter?" I asked when we were standing in the chamber again. This technology was superior to that of the Arkonides, and naturally to that of the Ferrons as well. "Who built the other transmitters and scattered them around the system?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it's a coincidence. Perhaps destiny doesn't want us Ferrons to wipe each other out."

The Thort turned to me, his third eye scrutinizing. "This transmitter belongs to you, Lightbringer. It's a thank-you from my people."

Conveying the machine proved not entirely easy. Shafts and passages had to be widened, some corridors rebuilt.

The work took three days, but I felt it was worth the time. Then the transmitter was in a hangar of the *Tosoma X*.

A few hours later, I delivered the device to the commander. He took it with less amazement than I had expected.

During our absence, the colony had changed perceptibly.

Everyone seemed at once resigned and hectic, focused and distracted. A settlement of busy sleepwalkers.

The defensive forts and ships in space were in a permanent state of emergency. He didn't have to tell me for it to be clear: the admiralty of the Grand Imperium hadn't graced us with any reinforcements. The commander had been left in no doubt that even in the worst case scenario, no deployment could be expected. The system of Larsaf's star had long since been written off on the Imperium's part. I was certain that Arkon wouldn't even send out an expedition to glean what they could from the rubble left of the colony.

I told him that given the circumstances, I would make the *Tosoma X* ready for deployment and combat.

"You will do no such thing," said the commander. "You will fly back to the Vega system."

"What am I supposed to do in the Vega system?"

"Live."

The commander instructed me to pick up as many Arkonides as possible and evacuate to the Vega system.

"I can't believe that we're running away, just like that," I said. "Bring me into the loop. What strategy is there behind this?"

The commander put his arms around his neck and looked through the spire top made of Cyarii glass foam and out into the blackness. The satellite of Larsaf III stood in the night sky as if cast out of cold light.

"I'm following the strategy of saving what we can save."

"And who will save you?"

He looked at me so long and so thoughtfully that I no longer even expected an answer. "Provisions have been made for me." He smiled. "That sounds almost as egotistical as it is. Don't waste any worries on me."

I wonder if the suspicion occurred to him that it was less worry that made me want to stay by his side and more a wish for safety. He was a survival artist, after all; a survival genius. That much had been clear to me all along. I'd profited from it often enough, as he had from my presence a few times.

He was no longer as young as me, but still young enough for someone whose time was still to come—if the methane peoples' space forces didn't draw a firm line under his life.

"Then we'll never see each other again." I waited.

He stood before me, taller than I was. All of a sudden, I had the feeling I knew very little about him. He said, "We will see each other again. I'll come to the Vega system as soon as possible."

I don't know if I believed him back then. I tend to think I didn't. I took it as a promise he didn't seriously mean, given more to make the parting easier for me.

"I'll wait for you," I promised, sensing that I meant it just as little as he did.

The *Tosoma X* had never carried so many passengers. Anything that was superfluous, we threw out of the ship. Out of the refugee ship that the *Tosoma X* had become. We slowly flew to the Vega system. I forbid any com contact with the Ferrons; we couldn't endanger them.

We made for Lannol, the system's sixteenth planet. After a few days of attentive searching, we found the transmitter from which I had materialized with the Thort. Through that, the commander would be able to follow us.

It took a few weeks to melt a hangar out of the rocks around the *Tosoma X* and install the ship there as the future Bastion's command center. Months more for us to build quarters, social spaces, sports halls, and such like for the passengers.

We all worked as if possessed. Every one of us knew the reason for our almost unrestrained dedication: we didn't want to have to

think about Larsaf III and what was happening there. About the carnage, colony's downfall, the death of our friends.

The *Tosoma X*'s workshops were taken out and expanded into industrial facilities. We dug up ore, made machines, laid out plantations, mushroom cultivations, paludariums.

Now and again, some of us went to hunt. One day, our best hunter didn't come back. Maureuc. I think the Naat was the loneliest of us all. The others had companions or could at least have found companions to choose from. But even those of us who could have become parents avoided conceiving any children. We produced cryogenic chambers. One after another, everyone put themselves into cold sleep.

Ilicia couldn't take it. After a few years, she asked me to be allowed to leave the Bastion in a one-man fighter. The fighter wasn't capable of exceeding light speed, ruling out a return to the Larsaf system. This also ruled out any danger that alliance ships, should they still be there, would become aware of the *Tosoma X* and the Bastion due to the fighter.

I believe she wanted to go to Ferrol. I let her go. I never heard anything more of her.

I slept the millennia away. In my waking phases, always just five or six days every few decades, I rarely neglected to inspect the transmitter room. Why, you ask? I didn't believe it back then. Over time, however, I became ever more convinced that you would come. Yes, the more ridiculous this certainty became, the more unlikely your coming, the more convinced I became. Convinced also that you wouldn't fly into the Vega system with a spacecraft, but would rather step into the Bastion through the transmitter.

I don't want to toot my own horn, but I have done a great deal. The Bastion is ready for battle; the army has mustered its strength over the eons. If you wish it, fleets ready for deployment will be ready for you in short order.

You don't have to thank me.

The only thing I'm truly proud of is that since I began with the Bastion's construction, I doubted your arrival less and less.

Kerlon had sat up tall in his seat. Rhodan looked at Chaktor and Lossoshér. Their gazes were unreadable.

"When did Thort Guall live?" Rhodan asked.

Lossoshér named a Ferron date. Rhodan converted it to Earth's measurements. "So you've lived in the Bastion for about ten thousand years," he summarized. "And we are on the surface of Lannol right now."

"Yes. The Eternal Bastion is expanding farther and farther," Kerlon said. "It's growing. Learning. Living. One day, Lannol will be no more than the thin crust over the vastness and depths of the Eternal Bastion."

Rhodan looked towards Wuriu, who shook his head barely perceptibly. In English, the scanner said, "No progress in building. Not in the last thousand years."

"Since your army went to sleep, you've been living alone."

"By no means," said Kerlon. "Elat is here. He's my friend."

"Tell me about Ellert," Rhodan asked.

"You already know what he's like," Kerlon said with a paper-thin smile.

"He can be quite communicative," Rhodan replied evasively, "but he also has his silent days, doesn't he?"

"Oh, yes," said Kerlon. "At times, we've sat there for many hours in total quiet. All we did was listen. To the activity of the machines, the digging of the tunnels, the widening of the caverns."

"Ellert will have spoken sometimes, though."

Kerlon thought a moment. "Elat has given me company over the

course of the millenia. I spent most of that time in cold sleep and only ever enjoyed a few days of consciousness at a time to check on the Bastion's building progress. When did Elat come for the first time? There was a period when I feared that the Bastion had taken damage, that the work had hit a wall." He bit his lower lip. "I don't think I could have survived the shame of that. I'd have walked out onto the surface of Lannol without any breathing equipment. Then Elat came."

"Can you recall exactly when that was? When he first appeared before you?" *I'm talking about him as if he's a castle ghost,* Rhodan observed.

"A very long time ago," Kerlon said. "Millennia ago."

He travels through time, Rhodan thought. *Assuming Kerlon hasn't fabricated this story.* "How did he introduce himself? Did he prove his identity somehow?"

"He did not. Strange that you would ask that. Truly, he came across as familiar to me." He laughed, and the laughing transitioned quickly into a terrible coughing fit.

"He's losing consciousness," Rhodan said, worried.

Curaploy raised its tentacle for another injection and delivered it. Nonetheless, Kerlon needed a few minutes to rouse from his slumber.

"Elat," he said, picking up the thread again. "I had the feeling I had seen him back then, on Larsaf III. Somewhere in the prefecture, maybe. Or in one of the markets where we traded with the native population."

"And?" Rhodan asked. "Did he confirm that?"

"Elat is rather eccentric," Kerlon murmured to Rhodan in a confidential tone. "He claims to have always known that he and I would encounter each other here. That he had seen me in one of his white dreams."

"Did you believe him?"

Kerlon considered this question. “Probably. Elan entertained me with his stories. Sometimes they sounded like the hallucinations of someone with mental illness. But he told them like experiences had on a clear afternoon, things that he had gone through while wide awake in the light of day. I think I’d even have believed him if he’d spoken of a journey to the origins of spacetime. Of a stroll behind the event horizon of a black hole. Which, as it happens, he has actually done, if I’m not mistaken.”

Rhodan could feel Tschubai and Wuriu’s stares. The two Ferrons followed the conversation with expressionless faces. Thora had leaned back, her feet crossed over one another, her arms hanging over the armrests in a relaxed manner. Her gaze, on the other hand, was practically dissecting the ancient Arkonide.

Rhodan asked, “When will Ellert come again?”

“I don’t know,” Kerlon said. “I’ve never known that. He was here when he was here. He doesn’t announce himself and doesn’t say goodbye.”

Rhodan pondered a moment. “Do you still remember the Larsaf star system well?”

“I spent many years there. Good years.”

“We once built a refuge on Larsaf II. On that hot world with no moon covered in dense. Isn’t that right?”

“A horrible world,” Kerlon confirmed.

“Entirely different from Larsaf III, with its moon that stabilizes the axial tilt and allows there to be four seasons.”

“Yes,” said Kerlon.

“We haven’t discussed Larsaf IV so far. A dull, rust-red planet, wasn’t it?”

Kerlon thought back. “I don’t recall either way. An insignificant heavenly body.”

“Between Larsaf IV and V lies that asteroid belt. Do you still remember that?”

“Some of our scientists think it could be the last remnants of a destroyed planet.”

“Then the gas giants, which we thought the methane peoples might be interested in.”

Kerlon confirmed this.

“Did Elat ever happen to call Larsaf III by another name?”

Kerlon considered this, then laughed. “Yes, he did. With a name that was actually not a name.”

“The Earth,” Rhodan said.

Kerlon looked at him, surprised. “Yes. The Earth.”

“He announced my coming, then.”

“He did. He said you would arrive transformed, as if clothed in a new body, but still yourself.”

“I’m trying to remember...did we ever see each other after your second flight to the Vega system?”

Kerlon looked a touch disgruntled. “Have I still not adequately proven that I’m Kerlon?”

Rhodan bowed and said emphatically, “I don’t doubt you. I’ve had no more loyal colleague than you, Kerlon. It’s about me and my own deficiencies. Some of my memories...” He made a tortured gesture.

Kerlon looked at him, full of understanding, full of sympathy. “Please excuse me. I talk and talk the whole time about me, Vega, the Thorts. I have no idea what you must have had to go through when the alliance’s fleet came. Yes, we saw each other once more. You came through the transmitter. In those days, I was already old, almost as old as I am now. You, on the other hand, appeared to

have remained young but hadn't yet exchanged your body. You said, 'I found the light, Kerlon. The true light.'"

Thora bent far forward in her seat. Her body looked fully tensed all of a sudden. "Were those the exact words, Kerlon? No mistaking them?" Her eyes gleamed with excitement. Rhodan noticed two tears slowly running down her cheeks.

"Yes," Kerlon confirmed. "And they were no mere words. It's easy to *talk* about the true light. But just look at him—isn't he proof enough?"

Thora stared at Rhodan.

Proof enough for who knows what, Rhodan thought. *Only for his own mind, maybe. He's confused by age, by years long past those anyone should reach.*

Kerlon drew himself up. "Now you're back. The moment that Elat spoke of has come. Time is turning in a circle. Who would have thought that? What's past is present. The Ferrons need our help again. What are we waiting for?" The old man tried to get himself up, but Curaploy pressed him back with decisive softness. Kerlon breathed out deeply.

He's right, Rhodan considered and threw the two Ferrons a glance. *The situation is getting more and more catastrophic for them. What* are *we still waiting for?*

Suddenly, Thora stood up and took a few steps in the direction of the panorama screen. "Kerlon, when you told us about your first venture to Vega, didn't you say there were forty-three planets there?"

"Of course." He crowed with pleasure. "Do you think me confused by old age? I'm a trained astronavigator."

"I'm only wondering," Thora said. "Positronic! Show us a depiction of the Vega system! We want to see its planets and their orbits."

The screen flared to life. First appeared, in holographic form, the

white-blue star of Vega. Then the planets faded in, followed by their orbits. “Positronic, how many planets have you detected?”

“There are forty-two planets,” said the Positronic. “Vega X is missing.”

“Vega X?” Rhodan asked. “Vega X is Ablon.” He had stood up and stepped over to Thora’s side. He pointed to the Mars-like heavenly body. “A desert world.”

“That’s not Vega X,” they heard Kerlon say, distraught and as if from a great distance.

The Positronic said, “According to my records, the Vega system should include forty-three planets. Between the current ninth and tenth planet spans a gap that I cannot account for.”

Chaktor and Lossoshér had stood up in rare unanimity. Step by step, they approached the panorama screen. Tschubai and Wuriu observed the scene from a distance. Thora and Rhodan briefly looked at one another. Then Thora suddenly turned around.

“Kerlon! Tell us about the original tenth planet. What was it?”

Kerlon didn’t answer. Curaploy, beside him, gave him another injection. Shortly after that, they heard the robot’s voice for the first time. It sounded rough and distorted, somewhat stretched out. “My master is not capable of answering, honorable one.”

With a few rapid steps, Rhodan was by Kerlon’s side, squatting next to him and feeling his neck for his pulse. Then he slowly stood up.

“He’s dead.”

13.

“I am the Thort”

Pigell

Tako Kakuta rematerialized at the outer edge of the Circular Starway. The event played out without sound, like a faded silent film, the people no more than silhouettes.

Kakuta barely saw flashes darting across the plaza reflected by the mosaic. The light effects showed the bodies in totally the wrong colors and in oddly misshapen poses.

On the opposite edge stood the giant, its insides glowing in pale shades like an X-ray. Three of the Ferrons lay contorted on the ground; a forth was just collapsing. The Thort stood with arms raised, a shield for Anne Sloane.

Kakuta took a few steps. He didn’t feel the ground. The Topsidans closed around Thort and Sloane like a mass of football players. Then they were both taken to the glider.

The glider launched.

Slowly, ever so slowly, sound returned to Kakuta’s ears.

He heard himself screaming.

It was dark in the glider. Sloane’s limbs were numb, though she was fully conscious. She felt for the Thort with her telekinetic senses. His chest was rising and falling.

The glider landed. A Topsidan bent over her; she heard a hissing sound. Then another. The paralysis subsided. Two Topsidans put her onto her feet. The Thort was already being led away.

The hangar was enormous. On the walls, Sloane spotted Arkonide numbers and letters, partly overlaid by the wave-like

Topsidian notations.

The lizards led them through empty passageways. At some point, Sloane was separated from the Thort and put into a stark, unfurnished room.

The door locked behind her. The light went out, and for a while, she stood there in total darkness. Then she sat on the floor. It was neither hard nor soft but too uncomfortable to lie down on.

Sloane lost all sense of time. She hoped she wouldn't grow thirsty or need to seek out a toilet. She felt outward telekinetically, found the sensor button that could open the door. Two of the lizard beings stood guard. She could have opened the door and silenced them both...but then what?

Only Bechia Yuaad was still alive. She was heavily injured. Her hips looked as though they had been brand marked with a horrible iron. The boiled remains of her poncho and underclothes were melted together with the carbonized wound. Kakuta could smell the burned flesh. Bare trickles of blood oozed out.

He touched her; she whimpered with pain. "I'll get you to safety," he said.

He still lacked the energy for a long-distance jump. At the edge of the plaza stood the giant. Hadn't Yuaad said they could heal people? Something about a sterile stomach cradle or whatever. He touched her shoulders, swallowed a few times for fear of what might be about to happen to him, fixed his gaze on the giant, and *jumped*.

He felt as though his mind had frozen over, and the ice that had been him was shattering. *Guardian of the North!* he pleaded. He heard Yuaad's shallow, fearful breathing.

"I'm here," he told her.

The giant's back was unexpectedly soft and yielding, like a waterbed might feel. He found two hollows there. From one arose a

stench so strong that it took him some effort to suppress the urge to vomit. The other didn't smell at all. It was two or three handspans deep and filled with a viscous mass.

Hoping desperately that this was the stomach cradle, he gripped Yuaad under the armpits as carefully as he could and pulled. She bit her lips bloody. Slowly, he made the Ferron slide into the gelatinous substance.

"Are you all right?" he asked, shocked by the pleading tone of his own voice.

Barely about to make out her reply, he put an ear to her mouth. Fumbling for his hand, she whispered, "Sing to me."

He sang the Yamanote Line song. He sang the entire circuit, with all stations. Then a second time. Somewhere between Ueno and Kanda, she briefly lost consciousness.

He continued, humming the song. By now, he'd held her hand for so long that he couldn't feel the difference between his skin and hers anymore.

She murmured something.

"I'm here," he answered.

Her eyes had widened in fear. "What's that sound?"

He couldn't hear anything. "Nothing."

She strained to listen, the effort costing her. "No, there is something. Listen."

He still heard nothing. "It's the rain. It's raining. The giants come to the clearings and drink the rainfall."

"Stay," said Yuaad. "Just a little longer."

"I have all the time in the world for you."

Later, after he'd recovered his energy and jumped, after he had

brought her back home, after a Ferron med team had taken her off his hands, he sat on the ground, his legs tucked up and his arms wrapped around them.

Later still, the leader of the med team, a stocky Ferron, asked Kakuta, “You were with her when she died?”

He nodded.

“Did she say anything else?”

“That she wished she could come as far as Shinagawa,” he said.

“I don’t understand,” said the stocky one.

Kakuta sank his forehead onto his knees.

“I am Genkt-Tarm,” the lizard being said by way of introduction, “current high commander of the operational forces in the Vega system.”

Neither Sloane nor the Thort answered. The Topsidan looked around the room the two had been brought to. He came across as self-assured and even-tempered without seeming arrogant.

“You don’t belong on this ship,” Sloane said coldly.

Genkt-Tarm raised an arm in a gesture that remained incomprehensible to her, as if he were enclosing a ball in the six fingers of his hand. “‘Belonging’ is a peculiar argument for you to raise. Or do you belong in this system?”

Sloane stared the Topsidan in the eyes. She couldn’t see any lids, or at least Genkt-Tarm didn’t blink. His eye color was indeterminate. Black, most likely. Large pearls of the most deep and velvety black. Attentive and clever.

The high commander stepped closer to the table. Only now did Sloane notice the faint haziness of his appearance. For a moment she thought he had wrapped himself in a transparent film, a coat of cellophane. Then it became clear to her that the Topsdian was

protected by an energy shield that followed the contours of his body. *Which explains his self-assurance,* he thought. It probably made him invulnerable to her gifts.

She had fought back, of course. She had even thrown Topsidans through the air. Then the paralysis had hit her.

Genkt-Tarm pulled a chair over and sat on its edge. The chair had no recession or opening for his supportive tail. He may have been sitting quite uncomfortably. Sloane didn't feel sorry for him at all.

He asked, "Where have you taken Chrekt-Orn?"

She burst out laughing. "The high commander is leading the interrogation? Does he also carry out the torture himself?"

Genkt-Tarm observed her silently for a moment. "The brains of your species are a fascinating object of study. Your sensitivity to pain is remarkable, and your receptiveness to mind-altering drugs is enormous."

"Oh," she replied. "I wasn't expecting to meet such a fan of my central nervous system. By the way, with all due respect for your painful arts of persuasion: even if you soft boil my brain, I could still only tell you what my brain knows. Not what it doesn't know. I'm afraid I have no idea where your predecessor is being kept. Nor does the Thort. But he is in our people's hands. If we die, Chrekt-Orn dies."

The Topsidan made a croaking sound. "What if Chrekt-Orn is already dead? Does your chain of consequences then go in the other direction as well? If Chrekt-Orn dies, does the Thort die? You haven't told me your individual name yet. You are a female. Does your culture allow you to reveal your name to an unfamiliar man?"

"Only if he means to do more than invite me to dance." She laughed. "If he has serious intentions."

The Topsidan widened his eyes a little. "My intentions are entirely serious."

“My name is Anne Sloane,” she told him.

“Ensloun,” the Topsidan repeated. “A name with meaning?”

“‘Sloane’ means ‘warrior.’” She hesitated a moment. “‘Anne’ means ‘God was gracious.’”

The Topsidan croaked again, a little more softly. “God? Here is here. Now is now. Consolidate your strength. There is no beyond. Clause eleven of the Social Directive.”

“And you would know,” said Sloane with all the sarcasm she could bring to bear. Silently, she admitted he was right: *Here is here. Now is now. Consolidate your strength.* “Free us,” she said, “and you’ll get Chrekt-Orn back.”

“I do not come from a merchant guild,” said the Topsidan. “Thus, I may be mistaken, but wouldn’t that be a bad deal? Two for one?”

“Is Chrekt-Orn worth so little to you?”

“‘Worth’? Another merchant’s word.”

“Do you not have value in your culture?”

He seemed to ponder the question. “I am responsible for the care of around a million members of my species in this system,” he replied. “On your scale, would that have a high value or a low one?”

“Look, I’m moved,” Sloane told him. “Maybe you’re moved as well by all that fatherly responsibility. If you’re moved to tears, I’ll gladly pass you a tissue. My species just can’t stand seeing a crocodile’s tears.”

She’d have expected that he’d at least ask what ‘crocodiles’ were. He did not.

He said, “I esteem Chrekt-Orn highly. His strategic intelligence is formidable. His incomparable empathy commands respect. This empathy motivated him to accept the Thort’s surrender in person as

the Thort requested."

Suddenly it struck her how ludicrous their conversation was. A human from Earth and this lizard-like being, two aliens in the Vega system, were talking about the Thort, the representative of the native population, right in front of him, as if he were a statue or some souvenir from a bazaar.

The Thort was silent and motionless beside her, both hands laid flat on the table. He had closed his two outer eyes; only the one on his forehead gazed steadfastly at the Topsidan.

As if he'd had the same thought as her, Genkt-Tarm now addressed the Thort. "I am a functional element of an operation, Thort. As irreplaceable as Chrekt-Orn may be as a person, another can fulfill the function of high commander. Me. My empathy is regrettably inferior to that of Chrekt-Orn. Nonetheless, I harbor the assumption that in you, Thort, person and function are insolubly melded with each other. If you die, no one will immediately resume your function. Correct me if I'm wrong."

"A new Thort will come," said the Ferron. It sounded plainly factual, as if a computer were speaking.

"Doubtless," the Topsidan replied, shifting into a new, more comfortable position on his chair. "A new Thort will come, appointed in the Red Palace of Thorta." The six fingers of his hand formed a ball again. "Now Thorta is under our control. Even the Red Palace is under our control. I am no politician, Thort, and I cannot speak for my government, the Despotate of the 7022nd Doubleyear. However, I cannot rule out that my government, in its wisdom, will make the decision to allow no enthronement ceremony at the Red Palace."

He bent far over the table. Anne Sloane briefly imagined she could detect his body odor, but if Genkt-Tarm had any scent at all, it was an electric one.

The Topsidan said, "I implore you! This galaxy is living through dark times. The Grand Imperium is waning. The stars cannot bring enough light to outshine the darkness coming over us. I say this

without any derision: don't you want your people to ally with those most capable of defending them? Do you wish to leave them alone in this situation?"

"You're here with a force of one million, High Commander Genkt-Tarm," Sloane interjected. "But billions of Ferrons live in this system. Do you mean to kill billions? Do you intend for your people, each and every one of them, to kill ten thousand?"

"Ensloun," said Genkt-Tarm with a dismissive hand gesture. "I didn't invite you to dance. Thort, the defeat of the Ferron civilization is inevitable. Are you going to sacrifice your people out of pride? Governmental custom? Don't let the defeat progress into ruin. Lead your people into our care. Arrange a surrender."

"He will never do that," Sloane retorted. "It's your civilization that stand on the brink of ruin. Conquerors like you have led their people to ruin on plenty of occasions."

"I have seen images, Thort," the lizard continued, "Of burned, melted bodies, faceless and clumped together. Burned out wreckages. Corpses floating through space. Victims of bombs, Thort, both young and very old men of your people. Women. Children. Shall we look at some of these images together?" He reached into the pocket of his uniform jacket and put a flat, disc-shaped holoprojector on the table. "I have looked at these images because I consider it my responsibility. Wouldn't it also be your responsibility?"

The Thort replied, "You speak of your empathy, High Commander. Is it capable of imagining that the Thort could only surrender under certain conditions?"

"I am very sorry indeed," said the Topsidan, "but I cannot imagine any conditions that the Thort could still pose in the current military context."

"You demand an unconditional surrender, then," said the Thort.

"Yes."

“Don’t do it,” Sloane instructed the Ferron. With his flawless skin, which looked retouched, he resembled a statue more than ever. “It would be a betrayal.”

“It would be the truth,” said the Topsidan. “Truth is never a betrayal.”

“Bring a camera,” said the Thort. “You wanted to show me images, but that is not necessary.” He pointed briefly at his forehead eye. “I have seen everything. I will talk to my people. No Ferron will oppose my words.”

“You are the Thort!” Sloane cried in outrage.

“Yes,” he said. “I am the Thort.”

14.

The Premiere

Myranar

Evening

Their performance was such a free interpretation that neither Gilbert nor Sullivan would have recognized their own piece. They made up for the lack of cohesion between scenes with all kinds of fencing, gymnastics in the masts and rigging (which Gucky assured the safety of with his telekinesis, Bull knew), and vocal interludes. When it came to music, Manoli took the lead. Alongside *Santa Lucia*, *O sole mio* and *Funiculì, Funiculà*, he gave his best to some of the loveliest pieces of classic English pirate music. Bull and Sue reciprocated with their own buccaneer song:

O say, can you see,

By the dawn's early light,

What so proudly we hail'd

At the twilight's last gleaming?

Delighted, the Fantan waved large white towels with all their tentacles. In the final verse, Sid and Manoli also joined in. Together they belted out:

And the star-spangled banner

In triumph doth wave

O'er the land of the free

And the home of the brave!

They sang so furiously that Bull, carried away with himself, had tears running down his cheeks.

“Crybaby,” Manoli whispered in his ear.

“I’m a sentimental asshole, okay?” Bull retorted, smiling merrily.

With a furtive sideways glance at him, Manoli whispered, “You’re not actually enjoying all this, are you?”

“As if,” Bull denied, his cheeks visibly reddening.

Then, when they recited the only song from the opera itself that Manoli had rehearsed with them, the purpose of the holo-boards became clear. Some kind of writing or notation appeared on it, and the Fantan on the stands began to sing. Though the words were not clearly articulated, and not in entirely familiar registers, they unmistakably joined in with the melody, full of enthusiasm:

Pour, oh, pour the pirate sherry,

Fill, O fill the pirate glass!

And, to make us more than merry,

Let the pirate bumper pass!

Then Bull gave one of the on-stage machines the agreed upon signal and the black ship went up in flames.

Bull, Manoli, Sue, and Sid stood on the stage’s apron. An energy shield held the roaring heat away from them and the audience. The extinguishing robots in police uniforms took up position around the fire.

Balancing on Sid’s shoulders, Gucky waved a blood-red pirate flag to the beat of *Pour, oh, pour the pirate sherry*. A ghost-like tapping came three times on the back of Bull’s head. He

concentrated on his back. *Found,* he read in the telekinetic writing.

Bull breathed out deeply. For a moment he forgot to sing along. “Fill, O fill the pirate glass!” He nodded first at Manoli to his right, then to Sue and Sid. *Finally,* he thought.

According to their plan, the Ilt was to use most of the performance to telepathically probe the Fantan. The goal was to find a suitable escape vehicle.

This time, Bull didn’t want it to be open season him and his companions, with the assembled Fantan crowd going straight for them. Instead, they’d hide on a suitable spacecraft as stowaways.

The search had taken longer than Bull had hoped. Gucky only had to read people’s thoughts; that alone was enough to drain his strength. He could spare the effort of teleporting aboard…for now. They needed Gucky to be able to jump as soon as the chance came.

And it won’t come more than once.

At the right moment, the Ilt was supposed to take Sue and Manoli into the chosen vehicle. Sid González would take Fulkar and Bull.

“And, to make us more than merry…”

The Fantan already knew about Gucky’s abilities, but Sid’s teleportation should come as a surprise to them. *And Sue’s abilities too,* Bull thought. He gave her the agreed upon signal.

“Let the pirate bumper pass!”

Bull, Manoli, and Sid (with Gucky) took at first one large step back, then another. Sue Mirafiore stayed in place now, alone, certain to draw everyone’s attention. She reached out with her arm and held the closed fist up to the audience. As if hesitant, she opened it. On her palm lay something that looked like a grain, a seed capsule maybe. Something that she had taken from the scrawny brambles growing in the tubs in their shelter.

She knelt down and laid it carefully on the ground. Then she

straightened up again. All had gone silent.

The end of this farce is getting closer, Bull thought. He felt everything tense up in him. The planet hung above them like an immovable monument. Evidently, the *Myranar* was in a geostationary orbit around this celestial body.

Bull hoped that his strategy worked. The audience's entire focus should now be on the girl, or if need be on him, the escape-happy rogue Gucky had warned Set-Yandar about so emphatically.

He couldn't see the Ilt grasping at the two shield projectors on stage with his telekinetic powers, but he could picture it. Sadly, the machines responsible for the large shield, and the energy barriers that were no doubt present, were too far away for Gucky to reach. Those were what made an escape via paranormal means impossible for Bull and the other Besun.

Bull saw Sue's temples begin to glisten slightly. Tiny beads of sweat formed on her skin.

A plant grew from the seed.

Bull could see tiny roots develop, seek purchase on the floor, and then, inexplicably, dig into the metal plastic. A stem pushed upwards. It grew as if in fast forward, reaching almost a meter within a few seconds. Sue held her hand over it as if to urge its growth.

Knots formed in the stem. A faint tremor ran through Sue's outstretched arm, then she balled a fist. The sprout shot into the air, visibly gaining width as well. Sue had to crane her neck to look up at it now.

Out of the buds on the sides, the first leaves emerged. They were paper thin and lance shaped, and exuded a weak scent of lemon and camomile that was not unpleasant. Already, they were so large that Bull and Manoli could have used them as blankets.

Bull, Manoli, Sid, and Gucky dodged farther and farther back, also taking small sideways steps to arrange themselves.

The stem grew to four meters, to five, to six.

Then it unfolded its blooms. Bull counted five petals, each of an almost see-through red. The petals wavered slightly although there was no wind here, of course. Then they caught fire.

At that same moment, the energy wall separating them and the stands from the burning ship went offline.

The heat came over Bull like a physical force. A wall of infernal noise struck them as well: the loud crashing, the crackling of the flames, the rupturing masts.

He groaned and stood paralyzed for a second. He watched as the petals exploded and hurled sparks high into the air. Sid, Gucky, and Manoli rushed off the stage as arranged. The extinguishing robots went into action. Sue collapsed as if in slow motion. *Too early,* Bull thought angrily. *And not in the right place.*

Instead of running, he stayed put. He saw Gucky turn around and hurry to Sue with exceptional speed. His movements had nothing clumsy about them anymore.

Contrary to their hopes, the audience didn't erupt into panic. Could it be that the Fantan believed this all a part of the production?

"Cel easme! Cai cel!" the Ilt shouted. "Help me! Right now!"

In two or three steps, Bull reached Sue. "What's she doing?" he called to Gucky over the crackling and howling of the burning ship. "Not here, Sue! Get up!"

"She can't get up!" the Ilt shouted. "She's dying!"

Bull felt all the blood draining from his face. "That wasn't the plan," he said nonsensically. Sue was supposed to playact a collapse next to the stage. Then Manoli would check her and call over another doctor, Fulkar. Being the authority he was for the Fantan, Fulkar would in turn request further help. Help that could only reach the stage from the inside of the station if the energy shield was shut off.

Then Sid and Gucky could teleport them into the ship.

Fulkar was already hurrying over with grotesquely vast steps. He looked like he was running on stilts. The very next moment, he kneeled next to Sue and examined her with an instrument that resembled a sturdy, fist-sized glass ball, through which text and diagrams flashed at an inconceivable speed. Fulkar held this ball in his hand and moved it over the girl's ribcage, then up to her forehead.

"She's dying," he murmured.

"Do something!" Bull shouted.

"I already am doing something," the doctor said coldly.

Suddenly, Manoli and Sid were also there, and the Fantan Set-Yandar.

From a bag attached to a long strap on his waist, Fulkar pulled out what looked like chips for a roulette game: fingernail-sized ovals of a shimmering metal, light blue and lime green and jet black. He spread the chips out on Sue's body according to a scheme that remained incomprehensible to Bull.

Bull looked up. Sid stood there with his mouth wide open, not even breathing. Manoli was squatting next to Fulkar by now. He gulped.

"Is this part of the performance?" Set-Yandar asked in a shrill, wailing voice.

What a nightmare, Bull thought.

At last, the defensive shield in front of the burning prop ship came online again. The heat abruptly dissipated.

"Is this part of the performance?" Set-Yandar repeated.

"No," Bull replied. He stared first at Manoli, then at Fulkar.

"I can't help her," said the gaunt doctor. "Not here, at least."

The two black chips that Fulkar had laid on Sue's temples, paled to an ash gray. Bull hooked his hand into Fulkar's upper arm. It felt hard, bony and cold.

Fulkar looked up at the Fantan. "I need help. Equipment from the med station. Order it brought here."

The Fantan swung the upper third of his body indecisively back and forth.

"It's your decision," said Fulkar. "She is Besun to you and your we-family, Set-Yandar."

The Fantan's tentacles suddenly drove through the air like whips. He made his decision at last.

It was Gucky who noticed the defensive shield had been deactivated. He touched Sue on the shoulder and Fulkar on the upper arm. Glancing at Sid, he asked in a businesslike tone, "Can you follow me?"

Sid nodded.

"No hard feelings," the Ilt murmured in the direction of Set-Yandar. Then, together with the girl and the doctor, he disappeared.

For a moment, the Fantan's tentacles froze.

Bull felt Sid González grabbing him on the wrist, then he found himself in a different room. It was cool and still. He heard several people breathing.

"We're here," said Bull.

It turned bright. The light source was a circle about as large as a discus. Its beam was mellow, more a golden gleam than white. The room that it lit up had a rectangular layout: five meters long, five meters wide, three meters high. One of the two ends was covered in shelving that reached from floor to ceiling.

A storeroom, Bull thought.

Sid González was crouching in the middle of the room, taking deep and deliberate breaths in and then out. He grinned at Bull, who gave him an appreciative nod.

Manoli had moved away from Sid. Like Fulkar, he was kneeling beside Sue Mirafiore again. “Do you mind explaining to me what you’re doing?” Manoli asked.

A thin, incredulous look flitted across Fulkar’s lips. “Do you mistrust me?”

“I don’t mistrust you,” Manoli said. “I’m asking you. I want to learn.”

Fulkar hesitated a moment. Then he began to explain. Bull hardly followed a single word of what Fulkar said, but he understood that the situation wasn’t nearly as hopeless as it had been a few moments earlier.

“Did you ever have the young lady practice what she did on stage?” Fulkar asked. “This paramental intervention in the plant’s physical nature? That’s what it was, yes?”

“Yes,” said Manoli, “She’s paranormally gifted. What she did on the stage was a premiere, however.”

“That premiere could just as easily have been her curtain call,” Fulkar murmured.

“You’ve saved her?” Manoli’s voice sounded pleading.

“Yes,” said Fulkar. “Me. My therapeutic capabilities. Maybe also the teleportation. It’s possible that during the passage through para-space, she drew some strength there.”

Manoli was staring at him questioningly as Sue flung open her eyes. Her lids flapped. “Gucky,” she said, straining. “Where is Gucky?”

Bull hesitated. She was right. Where *was* Gucky? He looked around.

The Ilt was squatting at the opposite end of the room, bent over double. Flashes danced around his head, like a kind of weak St. Elmo's fire phenomenon. His fur was ruffled. He whimpered softly without end.

Sue turned her head to the side and saw him there. She tried to crawl over to him, but Manoli held her back. "Fulkar will see to him."

Fulkar gave a soft sigh, grumbled something about "*extremely demanding clients,"* and was with the Ilt in a few long steps. Bull watched as he used the glass-like instrument again. Shortly after, he heard the soft hiss of an injection. "He's alive," Fulkar declared. "And he'll live. He's an astonishingly tenacious creature."

Bull felt the tension melting from him. *We did it,* he thought. *Phase one successfully completed.*

Which meant phase two could follow. He clapped his hands once in a cheery gesture. There was a lot to do. Exploring the ship the Ilt had chosen for them; ensuring they had provisions: water, food.

At that moment, Sue let out a shrill scream.

The young woman lay there, her eyes wide. Spasms shook her. A fine, bloody foam welled up from between her lips.

"What's wrong with her?" Manoli asked.

"I don't know," Fulkar whispered. "I'm not an expert in paramental phenomena."

"But you must have a theory," Manoli insisted.

Fulkar laughed or wheezed, perhaps both at once. "Who doesn't have those? I believe her paramental engagement has overwhelmed her mind. Exhausted it. During the teleportation—yes, I know that teleportation isn't a process that can be measured in terms of time, but nonetheless—during her stay in the higher continuum, instantaneous as it may have been for all I care, the woman absorbed hyperdimensional energies...or whatever you'd call them."

“And Gucky?” Manoli asked.

“The same is possible,” said Fulkar. “But it may be that this amount of energy cannot be handled by an inexperienced paramentalist. She has absorbed more of this energy than necessary, and perhaps temporarily encapsulated it within herself—her consciousness. Now it’s breaking out.”

“Sid!” Bull called and waved the young man over.

Gucky had gotten up and was staggering closer.

Almost simultaneously, the Ilt and Sid laid their heads on Sue’s forehead. Fulkar rolled the glassy instrument to the area around the young woman’s heart and did *something*.

Sue screamed again, inconceivably loud and somehow inhuman. It took Bull a moment to understand that he was hearing a scream Sue, Sid, and Gucky were emitting in unison.

Sue jerked her arm stump upwards. Bull tried to reach for it, but he felt himself being flung backwards. Sid, Manoli, and the Ilt also tumbled through the room, colliding with the wall. Fulkar still hung in the air, pedaling his legs as if underwater. He cried something that made no sense to Bull.

The same kind of St. Elmo’s fire Bull had seen around Gucky’s head now flickered around the arm stump. The stump itself opened up like a surreal flower. Bull watched as an arm grew from it. As the wrist developed, and the misshapen bud of a hand unfolded into five fingers.

The St. Elmo’s fire vanished.

With a sigh, Sue Mirafiore let the fully formed left arm sink back down. Her head tipped to the side.

This time, Manoli was the first to see to her. He felt her neck for her pulse and raised one of her eyelids. He stared first at Bull, then Sid, then Fulkar, and, smiling, put his index finger in front of his lips.

“She’s sleeping,” he whispered.

“Very weird,” said Bull. He had planted himself in front of the shelves and was scrutinizing the row of containers placed there. The receptacles were about as large as the mason jars Bull remembered from his grandmother’s house. They were bulbous, transparent, and, from what he could see, filled with a clear liquid, presumably water. A fish was swimming in each one. *Or something like that, anyway.*

Bull leaned closer to one of the receptacles. The animal was ochre yellow, fist-sized, and actually articulated like a fist too. He could distinguish four vertical segments. The upper knuckle of each (if you could call it that) was equipped with an eye. The back portion of the body dissolved into a pale, multicolored bouquet of fins or wisps that billowed in a soft flow.

Sometimes the four segments slid apart slightly, opening up three long, narrow, vertical mouths. The fish-like being seemed to notice him and gawked at him with its four eyes.

Bull waved happily and called over his shoulder, “Looks like we’ve solved our provision problem. We have water here and maybe even edible fresh meat.”

Unnoticed, Gucky had stepped up next to him. With his hands on his hips, he was bobbing up and down on the balls of his feet. “Funny how alike thoughts can be,” he said.

“You had the same idea as me?” Bull asked as he cautiously tapped at the vessel with the tip of his index finger. Counter to expectations, the material didn’t feel cold and unyielding like glass, but soft like plastic.

The aquatic creature opened its eyes wider and slid its segments apart. Little blue tongues felt at the container’s wall.

Like plastic. Or like skin. Bull took a step back in horror.

“Rather a presumptuous question,” the Ilt said. “If I ever thought

the same as you, that would mean *you* were capable of thinking what *I* thought."

"Uh-huh," Bull replied.

"No," Gucky elaborated. "What I meant was that the Aaoriov just thought about how its worry about having to starve here had solved itself. It thinks the Fantan sent you—and us. Served us to it, in other words."

Bull took another step back. "The Aaoriov?"

"Yes," said Gucky indifferently before giving a exaggerated yawn. "This collective entity. When the Riovites join together via their brain pouches, they exhibit a thinking capacity that puts some Positronics to shame. An Aaoriov is a pretty valuable Besun."

"Did you know that one of these—Aaoriovs—would be on this ship?"

"Yes," said Gucky. "That Fantan could hardly think about anything else except how to get this ship and its valuable freight to its destination as quickly as possible with as few complications as possible. Cherrgud—the good man's name, if that interests you—is the sole owner of this Besun. He can just picture his we-family exploding with pride and joy when he puts this Aaoriov in front of their tentacles."

"So they're like a biological computer. Are these beings dangerous?" Bull asked, and then, with a lowered voice, "I mean, we have young people here."

"They're as dangerous as they look," Gucky stated. "But don't worry, I'll intercede on behalf of you and yours. That should keep it at bay."

Bull fixed his gaze on Gucky.

"The Aaoriov will behave neutrally as long as we don't attack it. Just cross it off your meal plan."

"Okay."

“Moreover, we’re not allowed to injure Cherrgud, let alone kill him. That Aaoriov would take that as an insult.”

“We’d be giving it its freedom,” Bull pointed out.

Gucky sighed. “I fear the Aaoriov has a concept of freedom that doesn’t exactly match up to yours.”

“I can’t imagine how they could be contradictory concepts of freedom in this universe.”

The Ilt cocked his head and took a long, considering look at Bull. “Who knows,” he said finally. “At any rate, now you know the Aaoriov’s conditions.”

Bull nodded and turned away from the shelves.

Sue had sat up by now. She was holding her new left hand up in front of her eyes. She spread out her fingers, made a claw, ran the hand through her hair. Then she beamed at Bull. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself,” he said and smirked back. “Are you all right?

She nodded silently.

Manoli and Fulkar were conversing in hushed tones, obviously talking shop. Bull didn’t want to disturb them.

Sid González looked a little pale, but in good spirits. “We did it, didn’t we?”

Bull nodded but didn’t say anything.

“And now?” asked Sid. “Keep going with the plan?”

The plan.

Just as planned, they had escaped from the energy prison and sought refuge in a ship that was, for whatever reason, going far away from the space station *Myranar*. Phase one complete.

On to phase two: with the help of the Fantan pilot or crew, and

unnoticed by them, leave the area of increased vigilance as stowaways.

For phase three, the plan was to overpower the Fantan on board, ascertain their own position, and from there, return to Earth.

Bull pondered whether the Aaoriov might be able to help with this endeavor. *Later,* he thought. “I want to look around the ship,” he said. “And see if we can find out anything about the situation back on the *Myranar*.”

There was no way Set-Yandar and the other Fantan would sit idly by after losing their Besun. They would launch a search. Still, with two teleporters and a mind reader on the team, it should be possible to stay one step ahead of the search parties and flee from the *Myranar* on some other ship if not this one. He felt more optimistic than he had in a long time.

“Should I jump?” Sid offered.

Bull shook his head. “You need to rest up first!”

The cabin door opened without issue, and Bull stepped out into the passageway.

It took less than five minutes for Bull to find the ship’s bridge. It was little more than a cockpit. He briefly looked at the pilot’s seat cavity, climbed down, and soon found a halfway comfortable sitting position with his legs squeezed in. Right after that, a sensor button blinked to life, a pale shade of violet.

Standby, Bull thought. He touched the button with a finger. It lit up more brightly. Then, whole batteries of lights flickered in dull violet. A cascade of soft, bright bell sounds rang. A light scent of cinnamon wafted out.

Like in a toy shop, Bull thought with glee. Shortly after that, he managed to establish a line with the onboard computer.

“Will you enter a destination?” the computer asked. The machine spoke in Arkonide with a light reverberation to its voice.

“Not yet,” Bull said. Even if he had wanted to launch, how was he supposed to know the Fantan coordinates for the solar system? He didn’t even know what name Earth was under in the Fantan’s astronavigational listings, if any. “I want you to show me the current situation on the *Myranar*.”

“In what respect?”

Bull considered a moment. “Is the station or one of its sectors in a state of alarm?”

“Besun alarm,” the machine replied.

As feared.

“Can you give me a visual?”

Instead of replying aloud, the computer switched on a low, semicircular panorama screen. Bull needed a moment to make sense of it. It was the *Myranar* seen from outside.

All of the station’s cast hatches were open. Auxiliary craft were darting out into space from every hangar. Some of the largest units that had been parked on the outer surface were accelerating away from the space station.

The words “What have we started?” came from Bull’s lips.

He saw one of the enormous spindle ships rise up out of the planet’s atmosphere and pick up speed at a ridiculous rate. It shot past the *Myranar*.

This can’t be because of us, can it? “What’s happening? What am I looking at?”

“Besun alarm,” the computer repeated. “An unexpected opportunity has arisen to trade Besun on a lavish scale.”

A gold rush, Bull realized. *And just at the right time.*

15.

Regrets at the End of a Long Day

The Bastion

Some of the *Tosoma X*'s robots were functional enough to find food in the Bastion, or at least the basic elements of a tolerable meal. They ate together without any conversation arising. At one point, Chaktor reacted to a harmless remark from Wuriu with a laughing fit that no one else acknowledged.

Thora withdrew first. Tschubai and Wuriu followed, then the two Ferrons. The Arkonide ship had enough space that each of them could have their own cabin. Rhodan too.

The last few days, their experiences with the Bastion, the story they'd heard from Kerlon—all of that had exhausted them beyond the purely physical. While eating, Rhodan had longed for sleep, to see everything more clearly the next morning. But he got none.

After a while, he gave up, dressed again, and left the cabin. The light in the passageways seemed more glaring than usual to him. In the *Tosoma X*'s silent command center, he sat in the pilot's seat and looked around. By now, the technology didn't seem alien anymore. In his mind, he activated all the switches and handles that would be needed to launch the ship and take it up into space.

He leaned back. The seat back felt brittle. He cleared his throat and said in a quiet voice, "Positronic? I have a question."

He was speaking in English, but days would come when he would speak to Arkonide machines in the Arkonide language. It would flow easily from his lips, and there would be nights he'd spend on board a spacecraft like this on stranger planets than this. Maybe he would belong to a new generation of humans that left their homeworld and settled under new suns.

Gradually, his children and their children's children would forget

the Earth. In the process, the old languages of humans would fall out of use. If they had to communicate with flight controls from alien solar systems, the new humans would use Arkonide as their mother tongue.

Children of the Grand Imperium. Subjects of the regent. He shook his head involuntarily.

"I can hear you," the Positronic answered finally. "Ask your question."

"Can the long-distance sensors detect and analyze the movements of the Topsidan fleet?"

"My long-distance perception is heavily limited," said the Positronic. "It is in no way combat-ready."

"I'm only asking for information," said Rhodan. "No launch is planned at present. And certainly no military intervention."

A holo flickered on. Between several white dots were a large number of light symbols marking the locations of Topsidian units. It wasn't easy for Rhodan to read the invaders' movements. The Positronic instructed him, helped him with the analysis, taught him to see the invasion and the Ferrons' pitiful attempts at defense with the eye of a strategist, tactician, and logician.

It was clear that the Positronic had, even if eons ago, taken part in combat and learned from it. However, Rhodan had already long since drawn his own conclusion intuitively. The Ferrons were right on the brink of being wiped out. The Topsidans were superior to the natives of Vega in all respects, including planning and organization. The war machine was overrunning the system. Did the lizard beings even control that machine anymore, or was it out of their hands once set into motion?

"Do you need further data?" the Positronic asked.

"No," Rhodan replied. Suddenly, he felt an oppressive tightness even though the ship was enormous by human standards. In their spatial distance from the action and their proximity to the Bastion's

casemate filled with a mummified army, the *Tosoma* had something of a mausoleum about it. Rhodan had to breathe different air.

"Is there an exit from here to the surface of Lannol?"

"Several," said the Positronic.

"Would it be dangerous for me to go outside?"

"It is free of major risks. However, you should wear a protective suit or at least carry a breathing apparatus."

Rhodan had himself equipped. Then the Postronic told him the way.

"What are you doing out here?" Thora asked.

She had walked up behind him unnoticed. Rhodan had to have been sitting there for an hour already, on a stony hillside that sloped gently for about a hundred meters from the airlock, then appeared to drop steeply into the sea.

On Lannol, the day was drawing to a close. What *should* Rhodan be doing here at this time?

"Nothing," he said without turning to look at her. "I'm looking out over the terrain. Over the ocean."

Thora took a step up to his side but didn't sit. From the corner of his eye, he saw that she was wearing a breathing apparatus like him.

"Yes," she said.

He looked up at her over his shoulder. He could see her pursed lips visibly outlined under the almost sheer, oxygen-sated cloth she had put over her mouth, just as he had done. Mysteriously, the apparatus didn't hinder speech at all. If she was wearing one of those, she was prepared for a longer stay.

Rhodan looked straight ahead again. Vega had sunk some way

towards the horizon but wasn't touching it yet. On Lannol, daylight lasted only seven hours, as did night.

Around the clearly delineated circle of bluish-white light stood a diffuse cloud, a bubble which, saturated by the sun's rays, had become a kind of light itself.

High above Vega hung a moon. The satellite looked like a golden yellow disc, partly covered in craters with some regions looking smoothly polished in contrast.

"It's cold," said Thora.

"I'm not that cold."

They stayed silent a while. Vega sank further without any change to its color. Rhodan didn't know if the Ferrons had gone to the effort of giving this ocean far from Ferrol a name. Humans, in their eagerness to name things and thereby own them, wouldn't have passed up that chance. What would he call this sea with its mirror-smooth surface like glass under the evening light of Vega? The Pale Sea? The Platinum Sea?

He grinned. Humans would definitely come up with something more majestic.

"The others went to sleep a while ago," said Thora. "I should do the same."

Rhodan just nodded; he didn't ask how she had come by this knowledge. Had she knocked on someone's door? Had the Positronic informed her?

Finally, she sat next to him, barely a shoulder's width away. Despite that, he felt the warmth of her body, or thought he did at any rate.

Thora directed a searching gaze at the ground. It was covered in stones, some as large as a fist and some smaller, seemingly embedded in the soil. She put her foot on one of those stones, felt at it, and tried to release it from the ground. It loosened very slightly.

Continuing to occupy herself with this task, she said, “The Positronic informed me that you went into the command center again.”

He nodded.

“According to its records, you used the instruments that still work to try and observe the Topsidans’ fleet activity and reconstruct their strategy.”

“As well as the ship could manage. Which was astonishingly well, by the way, considering the *Tosoma X* is over ten thousand years old.”

“Compared to the lifespan of human technology, you mean.”

“Hmm.” He debated whether to let himself be drawn in by this little barb. He did. “That’s not what I’m trying to say. We haven’t even been building machines for as long as this. And anyhow, there are already some—steam locomotives, for example—that have been riding on the rails for centuries.”

“In everyday operation?”

“In the day of the steam locomotive.”

“Some sort of festival on your homeworld, I assume?”

Rhodan laughed gently. “Something like that.”

He sensed her turning to face. “It must be strange for you, this existence as a pioneer,” Thora mused. “You were the first human from your planet to fly faster than light. The first to travel to another solar system. Now you’re the first human to sit on the bank of an ocean on Lannol.”

As if summoned by Thora, an enormous life form rose out of the nameless sea. With its milky, bell-shaped body, it resembled a jellyfish. The creature rose high into the air like a hot air balloon. The quantity of water sweeping down its body showed how gigantic the animal had to be: ten meters in diameter, maybe more. When it moved right in front of Vega, it literally lit up. Some internal organs

became visible as if through a mist.

The being rose maybe a hundred meters up, then began to gradually lose its jellyfish shape. It transformed into a ray of frosted glass, a single wing that silently glided through the air, completing a few elegant loops that brought it closer to dry land.

Rhodan heard a soft buzzing in the air. Soon the animal turned around again, plunging itself straight down as it dove back into the water with such suppleness that not a single drop sprayed up.

Another thing I must be the first human to see, he thought. "The first human? What does 'the first' even mean? As I've learned very well over the past few days, your species has already been everywhere."

"Educational days for you," she said. "For me too."

They spoke a while about their experiences since the *Good Hope*'s crash. Rhodan talked about Rofus, the desert fort; Thora told him about the prison camp, about the strange Topsidan Trker-Hon and his curiosity on the topic of the regent.

"There, you see?" said Rhodan. "That Topsidan and I have a common interest. Maybe he and I will go and visit the regent one day."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Thora retorted.

"You didn't get that impression from Kerlon?"

"At least you got answers to some open questions about your history," she replied pointedly.

"Which is more tightly bound to the history of your once so quick-witted Imperium than we thought," he replied in kind. "I'm not actually sure if Kerlon's report gave us more answers or more questions, by the way."

"There are always questions remaining."

"Many questions," Rhodan agreed. "In some cases, I don't even

know how or *if* I should ask them."

"For example?"

"The question of why an Arkonide woman would arrange things so that she could be alone with the transmitter at the Bastion's core not once, but twice. Or did you think I didn't notice?"

"I didn't make any secret of it." She pushed against the stone with her shoe again. It was gradually coming loose from the ground.

Rhodan said, "Sometimes the best place to hide things is out in the open.

"Oho," she said and laughed. "You almost sound like Crest."

Rhodan looked at her, astonished. "Really? You're comparing me to an Arkonide?"

She narrowed her eyes a touch and let her gaze drift over his face. "Two eyes, a nose, a mouth. In the light of a setting sun, and if you don't look too closely, you could almost believe there's a vague similarity."

Rhodan laughed. "Thora, I fear you might be developing something humans call 'a sense of humor.'"

"Oh no!" She drew back in exaggerated horror. "That would be horrendous. But don't worry. As soon as we return, I'll tell Curaploy to generate an antidote for me." She pushed against the stone again with the tip of her shoe.

"What if the process were irreversible? Would Curaploy be the most suitable therapist? By all appearances, the robots on the *Tosoma X* are mostly wrecks."

"Maybe I'll find a particularly old one that's still steam powered."

"The transmitter, to go back to you, is definitely not steam powered. Even if I have the feeling it's much older still than the

Tosoma X."

She nodded measuredly. "Very possibly. By the way, you should learn to trust me. At the moment, preventing harm to you is an act of self-interest on my part. By using you, I'm using myself. Hurting you would hurt myself."

"That's some nice phrasing. Sounds almost like symbiosis." Rhodan smiled to himself. "On Earth, we have these diligent little birds that get to work between a crocodile's teeth and get rid of all the bits of food."

"And in this fable, you play the part of one of the helpful birds, while I'm the crocodile saying you should trust me?"

"Let's put the crocodile and its dentist aside. So I should trust you?"

"Trust me."

"Is that an order?"

She laughed. "Why should I waste my energy giving you orders? I know how you deal with them."

He raised his brows questioningly. "You do? Enlighten me."

"For you, orders are no more than non-binding recommendations."

Rhodan stood up and stretched. "All right," he said. "I will trust you, rash as that is. Sadly, I'm too tired to repair one of the ramshackle Arkonide interrogation robots enough to make it brew a truth serum that'll make you communicate. Haven't the Arkonides developed a hypnosis beam or something along those lines?"

"Those were available to buy at one point, of course," said Thora. She'd finally managed to get the stone out of the ground. Now she was gently rolling it across the back of one shoe with the tip of the other. "But the devices didn't sell very well. Arkonides haven't been interested in the truth for a long time."

Rhodan extended a hand to her. She hesitated a moment, tensed her leg, kicked the stone away, and then reached for his hand and let him pull it up, clapping imaginary dust from her pants. She watched the stone roll and roll. When the hill got steeper, it picked up speed even more.

"Promise me one thing. As soon as we're on Arkon and I've delivered you and your band of lawless starship thieves to the relevant authorities...please don't rat me out."

"What have you done other than sending a poor stone to its doom?" He pointed ahead to where the stone was still rolling. They watched until it finally fell over the edge.

"Here, on a completely uncivilized planet, I sat on bare rock, almost bare myself, without a chair or so much as a cushion. Not very becoming of someone of my standing, even if such fine details elude your simple mind. The Arkonide media could make a scandal out of it."

He nodded seriously. "Not a word of it will pass my lips. I think when the time comes, I'll probably be gagged or flash frozen, however your police treat men like me. If I'm ever asked about this evening, however, I will convincingly describe how four gilded robots carried you out in a sedan chair and laid it on the bank of the Platinum Sea without your feet even seeing the ground."

"The Platinum Sea?"

Rhodan gestured over his shoulder with a thumb. "My name for this body of water." He smirked. "That's how humans are. They love giving names to things."

Thora rolled her eyes. "'Platinum Sea,' though? Compared to you and your horde of savages from Larsaf III in your fighting steam locomotives, maybe the Topsidans are the better alternative for Ferrol."

He accompanied her right up to her cabin door.

“Sleep well,” she said.

He nodded and breathed in deeply.

“Something else?” she asked.

“We have to end the bloodshed in the Vega system. By any means.”

“The means we have or the ones we *wish* we had?”

“You think this war doesn’t concern us?”

Thora yawned. “How many wars do you think are being waged in this galaxy at this very moment? I’m talking of interstellar wars playing out across far more than a single solar system. Compared to those, what’s happening in the Vega system is no more than a meaningless local event, of course. Are you brave enough to give a rough estimate?”

Rhodan shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know about those wars. This is the one I know about. The one where our people have died. Or will still die. I can’t imagine that even the farsighted Arkonides, who see everything on a grand scale and through the lens of galactic imperial significance, wouldn’t see death as a meaningless local event when it affects themselves.”

Thora made a show of looking around. “Is there a defensive energy shield nearby that someone needs to lower, shaken by your rhetorical sophistication?”

Rhodan waved a hand for her to stop. “Go to bed, Thora.”

“And you go to war, then,” she said. “Go to war to end the war. The same monstrous promise that every warlord has given his soldiers: this will be the war that ends all wars.”

“I’ve never promised that,” Rhodan answered calmly.

“What are you afraid of?” she asked quietly.

“That you’re starting to know me too well,” he said seriously.

“You’re right, by the way. I *am* afraid. I’m afraid of the Topisdans. If we intervene further, however successfully, we might draw their attention. They could get curious and start hunting for our origins. Two or three of their battleships in the solar system, maybe only one. What could the Earth do against that?”

“What can we do against the Topsidans here? All we have is a madman’s Bastion.”

“A dead madman,” Rhodan added. “A ghost station filled with the ghosts of the past.” He shook his head, smiling. “Ellert. Ellert here, of all places.”

The mention of Ellert had a surprising effect on Thora. He saw the tiredness disappear from her face. “Ellert. The tunnel digger who dreams white dreams. You haven’t told me much about him.”

“Because there’s not much to tell,” he said and immediately corrected himself. “Because I don’t know much about him to tell.”

“Not much to tell? Oh, that’s not the impression I get from him,” she disagreed. “For a ghost from the past, he seems to be very much in the present.” She briefly closed her eyes and cited in purest English what Ellert had said, “‘There is at least one future in which this possibility will have become a reality.’”

“And humanity won’t survive it,” Rhodan continued. “The Ferrons and the Terrans are bound—in what? If I leave the Vega system now, I’ll lose the Earth. How? And what does that mean for Earth? Maybe my loss will be Earth’s gain. He told me to stay. For how long? Keep watch. For what?” He stared at her, entirely at a loss, almost angry.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Those are the decrees and dark directives of *your* oracle.”

“Thanks!” said Rhodan. “I don’t think *Mr. Elat* is currently hiring himself out as an oracle.”

In his mind, though, he had to concur with Thora. Ellert’s words had been anything but plain. Or had Rhodan just not understood

them? Did he not *want* to understand them?

“At least I’ve again found something I wasn’t looking for,” he continued. “News from the past of Larsaf III. An antique auxiliary craft from an antique ship.”

She closed her eyes for a brief moment. “So we intervene, then. What plan do you have in mind, Perry?” She looked at him expectantly.

“With your strategic intelligence on my side? With Ras and Wuriu at my back? With the entire firepower of the *Tosoma X*?” He yawned. “First step, go to sleep.”

He could still hear her laugh after the door had closed behind her. Lying in bed in his cabin, he listened for the laughter, but he couldn’t hear it anymore. He found that regrettable indeed. *This Thoraless silence.*

He would have gladly heard her laughing for longer.

Epilogue

The Earth

Later

Tako Kakuta falls silent.

Someone is giving her a signal. She's supposed to speak. Otherwise the viewers will switch to another station.

She doesn't believe that. She can't imagine someone changing the channel now to watch Orgy-porgy, or one of those self-discovery shows where the contestants are given drugs but don't know which ones. How amusing.

No one's switching over.

She ignores the director's gesticulating and lets Kakuta stay silent a little longer. Then she says, "They must have been enormous creatures, these giants."

"Yes."

"That Ferron woman, Bechia Yuaad...what happened to her?"

He smiles at her.

She asks, "You haven't said anything about what happened after your jump from the giant into the Ferron camp. Only that a med team was there. Did she recover? Is she all right?"

His face stiffens. It's no longer his own living, breathing face at all, only a photo of his face, a memory.

"Everything's fine," he says.